

Critical Issues Commentary

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Hebrews 6:4-8 on Apostasy by Bob DeWaay

“For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame. For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.” (Hebrews 6:4-8)

This passage raises several important questions. Is it possible for true Christians to fall away from the faith and not only become apostate, but irredeemably so? If so, is the Biblical doctrine of the perseverance of the saints proven false? If not, is this warning meaningless? What sin does the author have in mind that is so heinous that it precludes future repentance and forgiveness? To find answers to these important questions we must carefully exegete this passage in a manner that does justice to the whole of God's revelation in Scripture.

My thesis is that this warning against apostasy is always effective in the case of truly regenerate people. Obviously the writer of Hebrews did not believe that his readers had committed this sin (Hebrews 6:9 shows that he did not) or else the warning would only serve to underscore a hopeless situation. Its purpose is to keep people from apostasy, not to preach to the already damned. I will show that a warning does not have to go unheeded to be valid. I will also show that a real category of people fits the description, “apostate.”

The Previous State of Apostates

A series of four participles describes the previous condition of the ones who after apostatizing cannot be renewed to repentance: “enlightened, tasted, made partakers,” and “tasted.” The recipients of

this epistle would have considered those in this category to have experienced salvation, and themselves to be in this category. The four participles speak of personal experience of the light of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. William Lane comments, “The recital of what occurred with the reception of the gospel does not describe a succession of salvific events, but the one event of salvation that is viewed from different aspects and manifestations.”¹

Some have suggested that those described by these participles were not truly regenerate because the term “tasted” is used twice. They suppose that to “taste” means something less than a true experience of salvation. For example, Arthur Pink strongly emphasizes the difference between tasting and eating, and concludes that those who had only “tasted” were as yet unconverted.² The problem with this conclusion is that it fails to take into account the Hebraic usage of this term as shown elsewhere in Hebrews. For example, Hebrews 2:9 says that Jesus came to “taste death.” Clearly this means to “experience death.” Other examples of this usage are: 1 Peter 2:3; John 8:52; and Psalm 34:8.

Some have assumed that “Enlightened” refers to “baptism.” It more likely refers to the light of Christ that drove out the darkness at their reception of the gospel.³ William Lane comments, “What is signified is not simply instruction for salvation but the renewal of the mind and of life.”⁴ Tasting the heavenly gift, as we have seen, means that they experienced it. The “gift from heaven”⁵ is redemption in Christ, through the gospel. Being “made partakers of the Holy Spirit” involves sharing with the redeemed community the indwelling Holy Spirit.⁶ Albert Barnes comments, “This is not language which can properly be applied to any one but a true Christian; and though it is true that an unpardoned sinner may be enlightened and awakened by the Holy Spirit, yet the language here used is not such as would be likely to be employed to describe his state.”⁷ The last of the four participles denotes the experience of the Messianic age. The powers of the “age to come” are already present in the redeemed commu-

nity who look forward to the final eschatological fulfillment.⁸

It is clear that the author of Hebrews intended his readers understand these terms as describing their experience of the gospel. The warning comes in the context of the author's concern about their complacency and unwillingness to learn (5:11-6:3). A failure to press on in one's Christian life is seen as a temptation to go back. Also, warning about falling away would make little sense if addressed to those who actually had nothing but an empty profession to begin with. It would make more sense to urge such people to be converted.

Fallen Away

The sorrowful and tragic act of apostasy (verse 6) is expressed by just one word in the Greek, *παραπεσόντας* (“fall away”). To “fall away” seems dramatically incongruous in the context of the blessed privileges described in verses 4 & 5. Everything about the gracious work of God through the gospel leads one to expect an outcome of salvation. That redeemed people fall away is not God's purpose in regenerating people. This makes the warning shocking and is part of the reason for the controversy that has attended this passage.

Nothing in the grammar lessens the impact. Lane comments, “The aorist tense indicates a decisive moment of commitment to apostasy. In the LXX, the term *παραπίπτειν* has reference to the expression of a total attitude reflecting deliberate and calculated renunciation of God (Ezek. 20:27; 22:4).”⁹ He rightly points out that this is the equivalent of the idea of Hebrews 3:12 where the term *ἀποστήναι* is used in the phrase “falling away from the living God.” Therefore Hebrews 6:6 is clearly a warning against apostasy. Lenski aptly describes it: “There is no need to say more, this one word tells the whole story. It is tragic to the highest degree.”¹⁰

The impact of the warning is heightened by the horrific consequences. Apostates are beyond hope, it is “impossible to renew them again to repentance” (Hebrews 6:6). The reason for this impossibility is the shame and reproach they have brought to Christ: they “crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.” The reference is to the mockery to which Jesus was subject at His trial and crucifixion. The passage uses two present participles (literally translated “crucifying again” and “exposing to public humiliation”¹¹) to

describe the state of apostates and why it is impossible for them to be renewed. Apostates are disillusioned followers. These make the best propaganda artists against a movement. Apostates bring continued shame and reproach to the Lord and thus dishonor Him in the most wicked manner.

For this reason, some have concluded that this sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and is unforgivable as Jesus taught in the gospels (see **Matthew 12:31**). For example, John Calvin wrote:

For he falls away who forsakes the word of God, who extinguishes its light, who deprives himself of the taste of the heavens or gift, who relinquishes the participation of the Spirit. Now this is wholly to renounce God. We now see whom he excluded from the hope of pardon, even the apostates who alienated themselves from the Gospel of Christ, which they had previously embraced, and from the grace of God; and this happens to no one but to him who sins against the Holy Spirit.¹²

Lenski concurs: "The word blasphemy is not used here as it is in the passages in the Gospels that speak about the sin against the Holy Ghost; but "exposing to public ignominy" is a full equivalent."¹³ Likewise, Simon Kistemaker writes, "Deliberately sinning against God in full awareness and knowledge of God's divine revelation constitutes sin against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:32; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10). This sin God does not forgive."¹⁴

Further support for the identification of apostasy as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can be found in the parallel warning in **Hebrews 10:26-29**. There willful sinners are warned of receiving a more severe punishment than those who thus sinned under Moses because they have "insulted the Spirit of grace" (**verse 29**). The book of Hebrews is filled with quotations and allusions to the Old Testament. Therefore, the warning against apostasy may have roots in **Numbers 15:22-31**. Here there is a distinction between the one who "unwittingly" sins and the one who sins "defiantly." The first is offered atonement upon making the appropriate sacrifices, the later is cut off. The terminology is very similar to the teaching in Hebrews: "But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the Lord; and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the Lord and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut

off; his guilt shall be on him" (**Numbers 15:30,31**). Defiance is blasphemy and it shall not be forgiven.

We need to understand that this is not about backsliding. If it were, many, if not most of the readers of Hebrews, would lose hope. What is being described is a willful renunciation of the faith, not a Christian having through weakness, carelessness, or temporary indifference fallen into serious sin. Even Peter who denied His Lord three times was forgiven and renewed to fellowship. Barnes comments on the meaning of "fallen away" which he considers the equivalent of "apostatize from," — "[It] implies an entire renunciation of Christianity, or a going back to a state of Judaism, heathenism, or sin."¹⁵ Calvin offers this explanation: "But the Apostle speaks not here of theft, or perjury, or murder, or drunkenness, or adultery; but he refers to a total defection or falling away from the Gospel, when a sinner offends not God in some one thing, but entirely renounces his grace."¹⁶

An Illustration — Tilled Land

The author of Hebrews offers an illustration to accentuate the warning: "For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned" (**Hebrews 6:7-8**). The work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel of Christ is a work on the human heart intended to cause its recipients to bring forth fruit. Thorns and thistles are reminiscent of God's curse on the ground in **Genesis 3:18**. Blessing and cursing are Old Testament themes central to the book of Hebrews. Those who received promises from God and believed God are considered great people of faith (**Hebrews 11**). Others received the promises but died in disobedience and unbelief (**Hebrews 3:16-19**). In **Deuteronomy 28 - 30** God gave great promises of blessing and dire warnings of curses. Christians, according to the book of Hebrews, have even greater promises and more severe warnings.

Lane sees the warning as addressed to the Christian community: "But if the Christian community should become apostate, it would be like a field which was well watered and cultivated, but which then produced only thorns and thistles."¹⁷ Surely we should bear in mind the heightened importance of the community of faith in Hebrew thought compared to our ten-

dency to think individualistically. The illustrations in the book of Hebrews are drawn from the Old Testament — God's dealings with the Jewish community. There are individual ramifications and it is individuals like the great people of faith in chapter 11 who are commended. Yet the author of Hebrews is writing to a group of Christians who are balking at going on to maturity and whom he fears will consequently go back to their old beliefs, in their case Judaism. The rain of the Holy Spirit is intended to bring forth fruit. A lack of hunger for the teachings of the Holy Spirit in Scripture is an early warning sign of possible apostasy.

Issues and Applications

Most of the controversy about **Hebrews 6:4-8** concerns its relationship to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Exegetically, it is clear enough what the passage says. The problem is in reconciling it with other passages in the Bible. For example, consider **John 6:37-39**: "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day." Similarly, Paul taught in Romans that all whom the Father foreknew will ultimately be glorified: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (**Romans 8:28-30**). The rest of this chapter also offers strong support for the perseverance of the saints.

Some Evangelicals do not believe in perseverance and readily accept the idea of true Christians falling from the faith. However, such persons should realize that perseverance is a clear and important Biblical teaching. The thing that makes **Hebrews 6:4-8** and other passages such as **Hebrews 10:26** startling and disconcerting is the very fact that true Christians have such a strong hope of eternal life, one based on the promises of God and the finished work of Christ. To put Christ to open shame and trample under foot the blood of the covenant is rightly anathema to us. We believe that He who began His

work in us will finish it (**Philippians 1:6**). Falling away is not an acceptable outcome of our faith (**1Peter 1:9**; see also **1Peter 1:2-5** which offers strong assurance of the perseverance of the saints).

Those who believe in losing one's salvation should also realize that this section of Hebrews is not talking about losing and regaining faith, but renouncing it so as to never be able to regain it. It is not being saved then lost then saved again, rather saved then lost period. There would be no need to call in a traveling evangelist to seek to remedy this situation. This sober and fearful possibility is difficult for even those who have no belief in perseverance to accept. Thus it is a problem passage for all.

The teaching on perseverance is that Christians will persevere, not that they will be saved even if they do not! — *"We know that no one who is born of God sins [as a continuous state of affairs]; but He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him"* (**1John 5:18**). Perseverance is a promise that was given in the Old Testament: *"And I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me"* (**Jeremiah 32:40**). Thus belief in perseverance can properly be distinguished from the much abused and crass "once saved always saved" credo that some substitute for it.¹⁸ Perseverance does not suggest that those who fail to persevere are saved. The promise of God is that we will persevere.

Resolving the Problems

Therefore, the problem remains of reconciling the warning against apostasy with the promises of perseverance. I see three possibilities: 1) That the promises of perseverance are not really what they appear and many true Christians will lose their faith and their salvation. 2) That apostates are people who were never truly regenerate but had participated in the experiences and privileges of the redeemed community. 3) That the warnings against apostasy are effective: they accomplish their purpose and the truly regenerate **always** heed the warnings and do not apostatize.

Position One — True Christians Do Apostatize

The first of these possibilities is the least attractive. Though the language in **Hebrew 6:4-8** is very vivid and concrete, especially in the NASB translation, it is

not clear that the author had in mind any of his readers. The author of Hebrews repeatedly gave stern warnings coupled with assurance that his readers had not already fallen. For example, after the extended warning of falling into unbelief and failing to enter God's rest in chapters 3 & 4, the author concludes: *"Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience"* (**Hebrews 4:11**). The warning was to motivate, not condemn. Likewise our warning passage in Hebrews 6 is followed by this assessment of the readers' own condition: *"But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way"* (**Hebrews 6:9**). The warning in **Hebrews 10:26f** is just as severe but is followed by these comforting words: *"But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul"* (**Hebrews 10:39**). "We" here is the Christian community, the author included. It is clear that the writer of Hebrews did believe in persevering faith. He evidently believed the Holy Spirit's warnings would be effectual.

Position Two — Apostates Were Never Truly Regenerate

The second possibility has more to commend it and a number of Biblical commentators have adopted it.¹⁹ The strength of the view (that these were people who were part of the community of faith but not truly elect) is that the Biblical examples of apostates fall into this category. The clearest New Testament example is Judas. Judas had all of the privileges of the other disciples, had gone out with them and healed the sick and cast out demons, and had shared their many experiences in learning at the feet of the Master. Yet Judas had a demon and died in his own miserable sin. He fits into the category of people of which our Lord warns: *"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'"* (**Matthew 7:22,23**). These had indications of involvement with the powerful work of the Holy Spirit, yet Christ said He never knew them.

Another New Testament example is Simon Magi of Acts 8. John wrote about false teachers: *"They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been*

of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us" (**1John 2:19**). This is further evidence of a class of "Christians" who had shared experiences with the larger community but were not truly regenerate. Their leaving was what ultimately showed their true condition. Furthermore, the parable of the sower and seeds (**Luke 8:11-18**) predicts a variety of responses to the word of God including joyful reception that eventually gives way to falling away (**verse 13**).

More evidence for this view is found in the Old Testament citations and allusions throughout Hebrews. The whole of Israel was the community of faith that departed from Egypt, wandered through the wilderness, and given hope of the promised land. The community as a whole consisted both of people with faith (**Hebrews 11**) and those who died in unbelief (**Hebrews 3:19**). In **Romans 9**, Paul distinguishes between those of Israel who were merely "children of the flesh" and those who were children of promise. Esau is an example of a fleshly child and the author of Hebrews uses him as an example of one who was unable to gain repentance (**Hebrews 12:17**). Similarly, **1Corinthians 10** uses the community of Israel who were all "baptized" in the cloud and the sea (**verses 1-4**; symbolizing baptism in the Spirit and water), yet some fell into idolatry and perished as an example and warning to the church. Sharing the experiences of the larger community and then turning from Christ to idols would result in the same tragic consequences as it did for those following Moses.

Since the visible church consists of all those who profess faith in Christ, but the invisible church consists of only those who are truly God's elect, the church always has in her midst individuals who are like Judas among the twelve. Those who hold the second view about apostasy believe that apostates always come from this category of people. In as much as they are fully participating in the community of faith, it can be said that they were enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted of the powers of the world to come. Their falling away seals their damnation and serves as a warning to the rest of the flock. However, they were never truly regenerate and a part of God's elect.

Position Three — The Warning Is Always Effectual

The third option is intriguing. The

warning against apostasy is the means God uses to keep His people from apostasy. What is appealing about this is that it takes the language of the text with utmost seriousness and applies it to all Christians as the author of Hebrews intended. The four participles that describe the experience of those who are warned clearly describes Christian experience. There is no reason that anyone should read these verses and think, "I am one of the elect, this does not apply to me." The more one has experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in his or her life the more sober the warning. Those who have been given much are more accountable for what they have (**Luke 12:48**). Therefore, the sober warning applies to true Christians.

A strong proponent of this view was Albert Barnes. He wrote, "The knowledge that apostasy would be fatal, and there could be no hope of being saved should it once occur would be a more effectual preventive of the danger than all the other means that could be used. . . . It may be added, that the means used by God to preserve his people from apostasy, have been entirely effective."²⁰ Barnes did not believe that any true Christian ever has committed or will commit apostasy.²¹ God's means of keeping His elect from apostasy are many, not the least of which is the warning itself.

Some will find this position unappealing because they assume that if none of the truly regenerate will fall away, then the warning is of no real consequence. If apostasy is an impossibility, then it is meaningless and mute. However, one can make a legitimate distinction between an impossibility and what I call an unactualized theoretical possibility. Hebrews does not call apostasy impossible. What is impossible is to renew to repentance one who has committed apostasy. The idea of renouncing one's faith, denying Christ, and living a life of unmitigated sin is surely within the realm of things humanly possible. That some outward professors like Judas have already done this lends even more credibility to potential, eternal danger.

Yet if we have assurance of salvation and evidence in our lives of truly being children of God, surely it is true that we will not apostatize. But if we were to do so we can be sure that we would be facing eternal damnation with no hope of repentance. It is legitimate to introduce the possibility of something that will not happen to motivate one to avoid it. We regularly warn children about things they hopefully never do. For example we tell

them that if they play on a busy freeway they will be killed. If this never happens, the warning is still valid. As long as the danger is something within the realm of things possible for humans in the world as we know it, the warning has motivational currency.

For example, consider the possibility of all life on earth being annihilated by a nuclear holocaust. Humankind has the means, we are told, to do this. Though it has never happened and many never happen, it is real enough to motivate us to avoid it. The Bible teaches that God Himself will judge the earth, so we can be assured He is not going to allow us to destroy ourselves entirely before He causes all the prophecies in the Bible to be fulfilled. Yet we would be fools not to take the nuclear threat seriously. An impossibility is different. It is something that cannot be because of the nature of things. We cannot sprout wings and fly to the moon and we cannot turn lead into gold. Known impossibilities create neither fear nor hope, they are the stuff of fantasy or irrationality. Apostasy fits into the former category. It is something that could be, but for the elect will not be. Thus it is an unactualized theoretical possibility, not an impossibility. Its possibility is as real as a nuclear holocaust.

Conclusion

Positions two and three outlined above are not mutually exclusive. It is true that people who have been a part of the visible church commit apostasy. In their case, they left us because they were not really of us, **John 2:19**. That God has allowed this is part of His means of warning His people. Jesus knew who Judas was and what he would do, but brought him into the twelve. The story of his wickedness has served as a warning to all who have read the gospel account. This goes for Balaam, Saul, Esau, Korah, Hymenaeus, Alexander (**1 Timothy 1:19,20**) and all others who have likewise made shipwreck of the faith. These appeared to fit the category described by the four participles of **Hebrews 6:4,5** but it turned out that they did not fully experience electing grace.

It is also true that the warning against apostasy is given to the whole visible church. It is real and has motivational currency for the truly regenerate. The warning is so powerful that it is effectual and none of those the Father has given the Son will perish. They heed the warning and flee to the grace of God which enables His people to live an overcoming life. They

know that if they did blaspheme the Holy Spirit by insulting Him and recrucifying Christ, putting Him to open shame, they would be irredeemably damned. This fearful, sobering reality drives God's people back into His loving arms. This, I believe, was why the writer of Hebrews was convinced that his readers had "faith to the preserving of the soul" (**Hebrews 10:39**).

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End Notes

1. William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8 in Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 141.
2. Arthur Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968; reprint, Swengel, Pa.: I. C. Herendeen, 1954), 290-293.
3. R C H Lenski, *Hebrews and James in Commentary on the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998; reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 181, 182.
4. Lane, 141
5. Ibid.
6. Lenski, 183.
7. Albert Barnes, *Hebrews to Jude in Barnes' Notes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996; reprint, London: Blackie & Son, 1884-1885), 128.
8. Lane, 141.
9. Ibid. 142.
10. Lenski, 185.
11. Lane, 142.
12. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul To The Hebrews*, from *Books For The Ages*, AGES Software, version 2.0 [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: The Master Christian Library Series, 1997), 115.
13. Lenski, 187.
14. Simon J. Kistemaker, *Hebrews in New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 162.
15. Barnes, 130.
16. Calvin.
17. Lane, 143.
18. See John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Faith Works* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 175-192. MacArthur offers an excellent description of perseverance as taught in the New Testament and distinguishes it from "once saved always saved."
19. Calvin, 117 and Pink, 289 - 320 adopt this view. Pink offers many pages of commentary defending it.
20. Barnes, 131, 132.
21. Ibid., 131.