



GLORY of CHRIST FELLOWSHIP

A PASTORAL REFLECTION ON HEBREWS 5:11-6:20

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My aim in this brief paper is to lay out a path by which a person might traverse the rough and glorious terrain of Heb 5:11-6:8. This text is famously difficult to interpret, so if you decide to follow this path please do so with a spirit of humility and willingness to listen to others who might have a different opinion than yours. Indeed, my agenda in publishing this paper is not so much to persuade you toward my way of thinking as it is to show you how you can thoughtfully formulate your own. For the best way to develop strong, biblical convictions is to work through matters for yourself, in the context of Christian community, which is why I have hewn out this path as I have. Therefore, if you desire to plumb the depths of this wonderfully difficult text, I suggest that you take the following seven steps.

Step One: Seek to Understand the Flow of Thought in Hebrews 1-6

It is important to commence this journey by seeking to understand the book of Hebrews on its own terms. All too often inquirers have carelessly, or even unwittingly, imported preconceived theological or philosophical categories upon this text, or they have been too quick to ask questions of it that may or may not accord with its purposes. Admittedly, this is not an easy task. The seemingly countless books and articles written on this portion of the book alone display the fact that understanding the flow and import of the actual words of Hebrews is not without its share of difficulties. However, this does not mean that the quest for understanding is futile or that it is not worth pursuing. It is not futile and it is worth pursuing.

What follows, then, is an overview of my reading of the message of Hebrews, up to and including chapter 6. I invite you to consider it carefully, but also to read and reread the book for yourself and thus develop an understanding of your own.

The author begins by stunning his readers with seven assertions about the reality of the being of Jesus Christ (1:1-4) which, taken together, inevitably point to the conclusion that he is God. But in case there is any doubt about what he is claiming, the author moves on to compare Jesus to a number of things, beginning with the angels (1:5-14), because they are the logical head of the progression that follows, specifically, the angels who declared the “message” (2:2), Moses who received it (3:1-6), the priesthood that was formed because of it (4:14-5:10; 7:1-28), and the covenant, along with its sacrificial system, that was mediated by those priests (8:1-10:18).

With regard to the first, the author posits that Jesus is superior to the angels because he is the begotten son of God (1:5), he is in fact God and is thus worshiped by the angels (1:6-12), and he was made by God to sit at his right hand until all things are put under his feet (1:13). In light of these facts, the author asks, in so many words, Who then are the angels but ministering spirits (1:14) and how much greater is Jesus than them (1:4)?

With this opening argument the author begins to make the primary case of the book of Hebrews, namely, that Jesus Christ is great beyond imagination; with his next words, he begins to make the secondary case, namely, that given the nature of who he is, he is not to be taken lightly for there are grave consequences to those who do. As he cautions in 2:1 and 3, “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it,” and if we fail to do so, “how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?”

The author then moves on to address a question that probably arose in the minds of his readers, specifically, If Jesus was a man, and men are lesser than the angels, how can you say that Jesus is greater than the angels? Answer: he was “for a little while made lower than the angels” but this was so that he might “taste death for everyone” and thus identify with us through suffering, an answer which introduces a third case of the book, namely, that Jesus, though he is great and not to be taken lightly, is on our side. “For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (2:18).

Having laid out his basic framework, the author then compares Jesus with Moses (3:1-6), after which he exhorts his readers to hold fast to their confidence and hope in Jesus (3:6). The means by which they are to do so are (1) not to harden their hearts but to take care of them on hearing his voice, (2) to exhort one another daily, (3) to fear the Lord, (4) to strive to enter his rest, and (5) to draw near to the throne of grace because Jesus is a great and sympathetic high priest who is willing to give mercy and grace to help in time of need (3:7-14; 4:1, 11, 14-16).

After all, the author argues, every high priest is a mediator between God and men, which implies that they are for us and are trying to make peace between God and us. As for other priests, they can deal gently with people because they too are beset with weakness and sins, and must therefore make sacrifices for themselves. They know what it is like to be a sinner. This is not true of Jesus but he can still sympathize with us because he has suffered; he has never sinned but he has suffered and in this way he was made perfect and became “the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (5:10), that is, to all who hold fast their confession.

With this, the author returns to his second theme, that Jesus is not to be taken lightly, only this time he gets more personal and hard-hitting. Previously he had stated his warnings in general terms: do not drift away from Jesus (2:1), do not neglect him (2:3), and do not harden your hearts toward him (3:7-14), each of which, I’m sure, had its measure of impact. But now, beginning in 5:11, the author leaves off general warnings and takes up a direct rebuke: you have become hard of hearing! You are acting like infants when you should be teachers by now! Thus, it is time for you to grow up, to leave behind the elemental things, and to push on to maturity (or more literally, to be carried on to maturity), “and this we will do if God permits” (6:3).

But you must understand: the consequences of the direction in which you are going are grave and eternal, and God is under no obligation to save you from them. It is not like you are first graders who are being slow to push on to second grade; it is like you are first graders who should have finished college and been teaching other first graders by now. Thus, if God does permit you to move on it is owing to his grace alone. You must not take this for granted. You must not take his grace lightly. For every field that bears fruit is blessed by God but every field that brings forth only thorns and thistles is “near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned” (6:7-8).

Having issued such a stern warning, the author then most tenderly communicates that he has been persuaded of better things in their case, “things that belong to salvation” (6:9). In other words, he is persuaded that they are like the good field which God will bless for he sees in them, past and present, the ample fruit of hard work, love, and service to the saints. And thus he reminds them that God is not so unjust to look over these works and curse them as though they were a barren field. Only he longed for every one of them to keep pressing on to the end, not being lazy, but imitating “those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12). For God has always been faithful to his promises and those who have trusted in him have not been disappointed. And if this was the case for them, how much more for us who “have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek” (6:19-20).

In chapters 7-13, then, the author demonstrates just how Jesus entered into the “inner place behind the curtain” and what this implies about his relationship to the Levitical priesthood, the relationship between the covenant he mediates and the covenant those priests mediated, and the awesome hope we have in Christ because of these things. In doing so, the author repeats over and over again these three great realities: Jesus Christ is great beyond imagination, therefore he is not to be taken lightly for there are grave consequences for those who do, but he is our great and sympathetic high priest and he is on our side. It is of the utmost importance to understand this overall message in order to understand the meaning and function of Heb 6:1-20.

Step Two: Seek to Understand the Interpretive Issues Involved with Heb 6:1-20

Having gained an understanding of the flow of thought that leads to Heb 6:1-20, it is now time to identify and work through several of the major issues that have driven the interpretation of it over the years. I will share with you my leanings on each of these matters along the way but it is important that you think through each of them on your own because deep reflection is the path to firm conviction.

Before I begin, let me offer this simple bit of wisdom: as you think through these issues try not to be overly complex or overly simplistic. On the one hand, at the level of practical experience and application, the message of Heb 6:1-20 is fairly simple and easy to apply: wake up, push on to maturity, and do not play games with Jesus. It is a disservice to over-complicate the issues raised by this text and thus obscure the clear call to obedience.

But on the other hand, at the level of theological reflection, the issues raised by this text are fairly complex and elude simplistic explanations. Over the last two millennia some of the brightest minds in the world have debated the issues raised here and yet have not come to a consensus. This is not so much a sign of a divisive spirit in the body of Christ as it is that the issues involved here are indeed complex. So, in sum, do not allow these issues to obscure the clear call to obedience in your life but do not minimize the issues involved here because that call is so clear.

With this in mind, let us move on to consider eight pertinent issues raised by this text. First, in speaking of the “elementary doctrine of Christ,” the author encourages his readers to move on to maturity, “not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment” (Heb 6:1-2). The question is this: do these six elements refer to Jewish practices or Christian practices? Do they refer to things his readers had left behind upon becoming Christians or to Christian practices that made up their initial course of discipleship, so to speak? What is at stake here is this: the way one understands the nature of the temptation facing the readers determines the way one understands the nature of the punishment threatened by the author.

For my part, I think this list refers to the elemental things the readers were taught upon becoming Christians. I think the author is arguing that his readers should have progressed to the point of being teachers by now and thus should not need to return to the ABCs, namely, these six things. Thus, the temptation the readers were facing had to do with stunted growth, if you will, due to laziness, neglect, and drifting. Those who take the contrary position argue that the temptation the readers were facing was a return to, or revitalization of, Judaism, the implications of which are then worked out when such scholars come to issue four below.

Second, the author asserts in vv 4-6 that it is “impossible” for those who have fallen away to be “restored again to repentance” and the question is this: what is meant by the word “impossible.” Some have argued that this word means “very, very difficult” rather than “beyond the realm of possibility.” Others have argued that it does mean “impossible” but that it is only impossible for men and women, not for God. In other words, they have argued that a person, on their own power, cannot return to a state of grace but that God, by his power and mercy can bring him back into that state. Still others have argued that it means just what it seems to mean, namely, “beyond the realm of possibility” (for a helpful summary of this debate see Schreiner and Caneday, 21-24). What is at stake here is whether or not one who falls away can return to a state of grace. Or put in other terms, can one lose his salvation and be saved again?

I am persuaded by the third view because it seems plain to me that the word “impossible” means just that (see 6:18 for another use of the same Greek word). Therefore, if one can fall away from Christ, I think the clear teaching of this text is that she cannot return to the fold—ever. In my opinion, this is one point at which the scholarly debate has made a simple matter overly complex, and thus has done violence to the text. It is fair

to investigate the history and nuances of words, but it is irresponsible to bend the plain meaning of them to fit our interpretations. So feel free to explore such matters on your own, but be careful not to mishandle the actual words of truth.

Third, in an effort to be clear about precisely what one is “falling away” from, the author lists several signifying traits of those he has in mind: “who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb 6:4-5). The question is this: does this list describe believers like James or Peter or Paul, or you and me for that matter, who could then fall away, or does it describe imposters like Judas who only appeared to be believers and thus fell away? Is this question even fair to ask of the author of Hebrews or is he thinking in different kinds of categories? Strong arguments have been made on both sides of this question and, I’m sure you can see, that what is at stake here is understanding the nature of the consequences of falling away in light of the eternal security of believers.

I tend to think that these traits are describing true believers because of the strength of words like “enlightened” and “tasted” and “shared.” However, in light of vv 7-10, it does seem possible to me that the author is indeed addressing the “weeds among the wheat” for he has been persuaded of “better things” in the case of his readers. He envisions them as the field that God will bless rather than the one that he will curse. Honestly, I am not sure what was in the author’s mind at this point but I do think his words in vv 7-10 make clear that he did not expect his readers to in fact fall away.

Fourth, what does the author mean, exactly, by the term “fall away”? Does he mean “lose one’s salvation” or does he mean “lose some of the benefits of that salvation”? The particular word he chooses is used only here in the NT and therefore there is little interpretive precedent to go on. However, it is used several times in the LXX (or the Septuagint, the Greek version of the OT) where it essentially means “to be unfaithful” to God (Est 6:10; Ez 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4). This leads me to think that the author does indeed mean “to lose one’s salvation,” or “to fall out of God’s favor in a decisive manner.” What is at stake here is exactly what is lost when one falls away, a matter that will become clearer in a moment when we consider several interpretive possibilities for this passage.

Fifth, some have argued that the word usually translated “crucify again the son of God” should be translated “while crucifying the son of God.” The difference is that the former translation signifies the reason why the fallen can never return, whereas the latter translation signifies the period of time during which they cannot return. In other words, the former translation implies that the state of the fallen is so serious and permanent because, having spurned the sacrifice and salvation of Jesus Christ, there is no further sacrifice left for them. Alternatively, the latter translation implies that this is true of the fallen only so long as they continue in their rejection of him but should they return to a place of humble acceptance, God will receive them into his fold again. What is at stake here, as with the debate over the word “impossible,” is whether or not one who has fallen away can return to a state of grace. I am persuaded that the former translation is the correct one and that, therefore, the one who falls away can never return to a state of grace. This conclusion, in fact, seems inescapable to me. Yes, at times I have strong opinions even if I have a passion to see you develop your own!

Sixth, what is the author trying to communicate in vv 7-12? Is he identifying the readers with the barren field of v 8 as the logic of vv 4-6 would seem to suggest, or is he identifying them with the fruitful field of v 7 as his comments in vv 10-12 would seem to suggest? What is at stake here, as with the discussion of the several traits listed in vv 4-6, is whether the author is making a real or a hypothetical threat against his readers. Does he mean for them to conclude that they really can fall away and that they are “near” to doing so (v 8), or does he mean for them to conclude that, though their drifting is serious and they need to wake up, they are not near to falling away and they will in fact never fall away?

I tend to think that the latter possibility is the correct one, though I freely admit that this causes some friction with my thoughts about the traits listed in vv 4-6. But as I said at that point, one way or the other I am fairly certain that the author did not think his readers would actually fall away, even if he thought falling away was possible.

Finally, in the scholarly debates over this text, there is a surprising dearth of discussion of the function of vv 13-20. It seems to me, however, that these verses play a significant role in the interpretation of this text—not decisive but significant. As I mentioned in my summary of Hebrews 1-6, I think these verses are designed to make the following point: God has always been faithful to his promises and those who have trusted in him have

not been disappointed. If this was the case for believers of old, who were under the last covenant, how much more for us who “have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek” (6:19-20).

In other words, the author is exhorting his readers to press on (vv 11-12) because God is faithful and their hope in Christ is sure. This seems to me to strengthen the case that the author is either presenting a hypothetical threat in vv 4-6 or that, in the face of an actual threat, he does not think his readers will, or perhaps even can, fall away.

These, then, are the eight main issues you must consider if you are to understand Heb 6:1-20 well. There are more issues to be considered, but these will set you on the right path—and they will keep you busy for some time to come! Remember not to get lost in the complexity of them and so lose the plain application of this text for your life, but also remember not to be overly simplistic about them and to belittle the important, and valid, issues raised here.

Step Three: Seek to Understand the Interpretive Possibilities for Hebrews 6:1-20

Having gained an understanding of the flow of thought in Heb 1-6 and of the key issues involved in interpreting 6:1-20, it is now time to familiarize yourself with the interpretive possibilities that have emerged over the centuries as scholars have debated the preceding issues. I encourage you to strive to understand and appreciate each position and not to be quick to dismiss or demean any position. Listen carefully to each scholar you read, consider his or her arguments well, and give each one the benefit of a gracious spirit. You may be surprised how much you can learn from those with whom you disagree if you will but listen well, and one way or the other you will become more like Jesus Christ in the process.

In his article, “The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8,” Randall Gleason divides the “camps” that have grown up around this text into four categories, to which I have added two more. First, there is the “saved-lost” camp. This camp asserts that the author of Hebrews is describing genuine believers in vv 4-6 and that therefore the threat of falling away implies that genuine believers can indeed lose their salvation. The majority of the proponents of this position are Arminians but not all. As Gleason has noted, “while all who affirm this view reject the Calvinistic formulations of the Synod of Dort (1618-1619), ‘many are not happy to be lumped together as Arminians’” (69). Among the more recent proponents of this view Scot McKnight stands out and I heartily recommend his article (1992).

Second, there is the “pseudo-Christians” camp. This camp argues that the author of Hebrews is describing *apparent* believers in 6:4-6 and that the threat of falling away, which is real, applies only to them. They insist, on various grounds and from various texts, (1) that it is not possible for genuine believers to fall away and (2) that unbelievers are always present in the midst of believers so that it makes most sense to see the author of Hebrews addressing such unbelievers. Among the more recent proponents of this view, I am most impressed with the work of Robert Peterson not only because of his thorough scholarship but because of his humility towards those with whom he disagrees. I encourage you to read his article simply called, “Apostasy” (see also Grudem, Hughes, Kempson, Nicole, and Wuest).

Third, there is the “hypothetical or idle threat” camp. This camp purports that the author of Hebrews is addressing genuine believers in vv 4-6 but that the threat he is making against them could in fact never occur. They do not deny that God is great or that his wrath is real or that those who spurn him will incur such wrath. Rather they argue that it is impossible for genuine believers to lose their salvation and therefore that the function of threats such as Heb 6:4-6 in the lives of genuine believers is to spur them on to faith and perseverance. Among the more recent treatments of this position, I would recommend the book by Tom Schreiner and Ardel Caneday, *The Race Set before Us*. I must admit that they actually try to distinguish their position from this one, but in my judgment they have not succeeded. In other words, I think their position is essentially a nuanced “hypothetical threat” position (see also Attridge, Bruce, Ellingworth, Lane, Spicq, and Wescott).

Fourth, there is the “temporal punishment/loss of rewards” camp. This camp argues that the author of Hebrews is describing genuine believers in vv 4-6, that his threat is real and not hypothetical, and that the threat is indeed made against genuine believers. But they go on to assert that the threat of falling away does not entail

the loss of salvation and eternal punishment, but rather temporal punishment and the loss of eternal rewards. The most helpful summary article of this position is Randall Gleason's, "The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8" (see also Hodges, Kendall, Oberholtzer, Rowell, and Wilkin).

Fifth, there is what I call the "communal" camp. This camp asserts that the author of Hebrews is addressing the community of believers in 6:1-20, not individuals, and that therefore the whole discussion of eternal security is misdirected. The work of Verlyn Verbrugge, though finally not persuasive, best articulates this view (1980; see also Mathewson and Weeks).

Finally, there is what I call the "other" camp—not so creative, I admit! The scholars I lump together into this camp attempt, in one way or other, to minimize the centrality of the eternal security issue in Hebrews 6 and maximize some alternative cultural or theological issue which they think sheds more light on the text. For example, David deSilva has tried to show that near-middle-eastern assumptions about patron-client relationships ought to guide our interpretation of this text, beginning with the kinds of questions we bring to it (1999). Martin Emmrich has highlighted the role of the Holy Spirit in Hebrews and has tried to argue that the point of chapter 6 is to say that retention of the Holy Spirit is dependent on obedience (2003). Finally, Brent Nongbri appeals to apocalyptic literature such as 4 Ezra to show that the author of Hebrews is attempting to evoke a certain kind of fear in his readers, but then Nongbri appeals to Graeco-Roman rhetoric to show that in the end the author's threats, though real, are designed to evoke a positive response (2003). In my view, while all of these articles are worth reading, none of them are finally persuasive.

It is important for you to spend some time thinking about each of these camps, although if you run out of time or passion you may profitably omit the last two. Therefore, I would urge you to read as much as you can from each camp, but if you do not have the inclination to do so at least read the helpful summaries by Gleason and Schreiner/Caneday cited above. And again, the point in completing this step is to familiarize yourself with the interpretive possibilities that have emerged over the centuries so that you can come to a well-rounded, thoughtful conclusion of your own.

Step Four: Seek the Jesus of whom the Author Writes

The next several steps are much more simple. Having gained an understanding of the flow of thought in Heb 1-6 and of the key issues involved in interpreting 6:1-20 and of the interpretive possibilities, you are now in a place to formulate your own thoughtful position. But before you get to thinking too deeply, I would advise you to draw near to this Jesus of whom the author of Hebrews writes and plead for his help. Jesus Christ is wise beyond imagination and he knows a thing or two about the book of Hebrews. Furthermore, he is your great and sympathetic high priest who is on your side and eager to help you—so ask him for spiritual insight. Consult the thoughts of others and respect all of your teachers, but depend on Jesus Christ alone. Of course, you should have been dependent on him throughout the entire journey but that dependence is perhaps most pressing now.

So put down the books, put even the text of Hebrews aside for the moment, and steal away with Jesus. After you have communed well with him, return to read and reread Hebrews, and to read and reread a few articles if you must.

Step Five: Seek Understanding in Community, not Isolation

This step should characterize your entire journey as well but it is most pressing now. Just before you set your position in cement, be sure to draw near to other lovers of Jesus with whom you can verbally and physically interact. Reading articles and books is a kind of community that is good and even necessary but, in the end, nothing can replace face to face interaction with other lovers of Jesus. This is why the author of Hebrews exhorts us with words like these: "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...And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (3:13; 10:24-25). As genuine believers we are united, not only to Christ, but also to one another in Christ and therefore we need each other if we're to grow in understanding.

Step Six: Be Fully Convinced—and also be Humble

If you have not already done so, it is time now to articulate in writing your position on this text, but as you do please heed this word of wisdom: remember to be Christ-like toward those with whom you disagree. The matters involved with understanding Heb 6:1-20 are complex, and great thinkers who love Jesus have responsibly interpreted them in various ways. Thus, do not let yourself think that you or your camp alone handle the text well or understand the intention of the author. I urge you, in the words of the apostle Paul, to be fully convinced in your own mind (Rom 14:5) but also to be humble and care more for your brother or sister in Christ than your position on this text. Remain open to them, and teachable, knowing that you may not be right about every detail. And in any case, learn to articulate yourself to others in such a way that you display your intimate knowledge of this Jesus of whom the author of Hebrews speaks.

Step Seven: Let Theology give way to Doxology

Given that the main point of the book of Hebrews is to exalt the superior worth of Jesus Christ, to display with great insight the fact that he is exalted far above all things and persons, and given the specific call to worship in 12:28-29, I do not see how any genuine believer—regardless of his or her camp—can end a study like this in any other way than to bow down in reverential worship of him who is not to be taken lightly. So then, let us worship: “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (12:28-29).

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