

Staying Saved: Hebrews 6:4-8 Revisited

Always in Jeopardy

In one of the opening scenes of the smash movie *The Incredibles*, Mr. Incredible shouts out in a tone of frustration, "I just wish the world would stay being saved! But the world is always in jeopardy." The super hero saves the world from evil, but before long the world is need of rescue again. And so he has to go back to work.

Pastors and theologians might not want to put things in just the same way as Mr. Incredible. But the point the super hero makes is one that every shepherd in the church can relate to. *Why can't people just stay "saved"?* Why does it seem so many of God's people are constantly putting themselves in jeopardy?

Pastors frequently find themselves dealing with church folks who seem determined to live on the edge of apostasy. By only attending worship services intermittently, by dabbling in internet pornography, by hanging around friends who constantly put them in compromising situations, by dating the wrong person, and in a million other ways (the variety of sin knows no bounds!), people who bear God's name and participate in his covenant put themselves in spiritual jeopardy. Sadly, in some cases people really do apostatize. In other cases, they draw back from the brink, but only after learning painful lessons.

The book of Hebrews addresses just this sort of situation. Specifically, it speaks to a body of Jewish Christians who risk caving into pressures that would draw them back into a christless Judaism. Thus the author of this sermon-epistle mounts a sustained exhortation to perseverance in Christian faith, arguing for the supremacy of the new covenant. Those he writes to have not yet committed apostasy, but the warning alarms are sounding and the yellow caution lights are flashing. They are standing at a fork in the road and must decide which path they will travel from this point forward. Will they persevere in Christ to the end? Or will they shrink back, to their own destruction?

This essay is a follow up to an earlier piece I wrote on the same biblical text, entitled "New Life and Apostasy: Hebrews 6:4-8 as a Test Case" in *The Federal Vision*, edited by Duane Garner and Steve Wilkins (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004). In this continuation of that previous article, I hope to fill in some exegetical details I did not cover in the earlier essay and demonstrate further how my reading of the passage works theologically and pastorally. This is still not a comprehensive exegesis (if such a thing is even possible!), but an exploration of important features of the passage that bear upon a theology of assurance and apostasy. In particular, I want to set Hebrews 6:4-8 in its covenantal, intertextual¹ framework, showing how

¹ Intertextual studies of Scripture are in abundance these days. The best has been and remains Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). See also my essay "The Art of Biblical Theology in Practice: Intertextuality And Two Pauline Case Studies

it echoes and alludes to various Old Testament passages. The key to exegeting and applying Hebrews 6:4-8 is grasping its multiple narrative substructures; that is to say, reading it through the lens of its old covenant matrix.²

While the rhetorical strategy of Hebrews combines *warnings* about falling away with *exhortations* to persevering faith, the *warnings* get the most attention from theologians because of the problems they pose in relation to God's sovereignty and the doctrine of eternal security. Of the various warning passages in the book, 6:4-8 is usually the most scrutinized because it presents several unique, and very thorny, interpretive issues, especially for the Reformed reader who wants to keep his Calvinism in tact (as I do).

The Eschatological Exodus and the Threat of Eternal Exile

Several clues indicate that 6:4-6 is based on the Israel's exodus narrative in general, and their time at Kadesh-Barnea in particular, when the people refused to enter the land of promise and instead yearned for a return to Egyptian slavery (Num. 13-14; Ps. 95). Israel's wilderness rebellion stands as a negative model for the Hebrew Christians precisely because there are strong analogies between the situation of Israel in the wilderness and the situation of these first century Jewish Christians. In both cases, the covenant people have experienced God's rescue. But in both cases, the people are in danger of turning their backs on God's redemption, and returning to a situation of slavery, thus falling short of the goal. By carefully choosing language from the exodus narratives, the writer of Hebrews is retelling Israel's story with a new cast of characters, putting the nascent Jewish-Christian community in the place of Israel's wilderness community.³

(Notes On Biblical Theology #3)," available at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/the_art_of_biblical_theology.htm.

² For another attempt to exegete this text in a framework of Old Testament intertextuality, see Dave Mathewson, "Reading Hebrews 6:4-6 in Light of the Old Testament," *Westminster Theological Journal* 61 (1999) 209-25. Mathewson's article has a lot to offer, but as will be shown below, it also has some critical deficiencies.

³ Many commentators make this same general point, but I would press the analogy between the Hebrew Christians and Israel's wilderness generation a bit harder than most. Hebrews must be read in "preterist" fashion, taking into account the monumental "approaching day" of 70 A. D. when the temple was finally destroyed and the new covenant inaugurated in all its fullness. This is the next great event on the eschatological timetable from the perspective of the author, and its shadow hangs over the entire book. Hebrews is a "new covenant Deuteronomy," written towards the end of the 40 year period of "wilderness wandering" during which time the apostles are preparing the church for a worldwide evangelistic invasion (30-70 A. D.). Fleshing out the details of this aspect of Hebrews would take us too far afield from our topic here. For a primer on how to read Hebrews from a preterist point of view, see Doug Wilson's lecture "Hebrews: New Testament Deuteronomy," given as part of the 2004 Christ Church Ministerial Conference, *Type and Antitype*, available from Canon Press. The orthodox preterist reading suggested here should not be confused with heretical hyper-preterism.

Though it less is obvious and less direct, 6:7-8 appear to be reliant on a pair of Old Testament passages, namely Deuteronomy 11:11 and Isaiah 5:1-7.⁴ In these texts, the situation is a bit different, as the background shifts from a wilderness situation to an “in the land” situation. But the basic point is the same. These Old Testament texts presuppose Israel’s presence in the land of Canaan, but also envision the possibility of exile from the land back into the wilderness. Israel has been blessed, but past blessing in itself is no guarantee of future success. Indeed, God sets before the people two options, blessing for perseverance and cursing for disobedience (cf. Dt. 11 as a whole). This “Israel-is-blessed-but-now-must-choose-to-continue-in-obedience-or-else-be-cursed” structure draws together the situation of the readers of Hebrews with that foreseen in the Deuteronomic passage. While the situation of the Hebrews is intensified by the radical newness of the new covenant, the same basic covenantal paradigm is in play.

Deuteronomy 11:11 speaks of Israel’s land drinking “water from the rain of heaven.” God blesses Israel with heavenly, eschatological water. And yet this blessing must be received in faith, lest God “shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the Lord is giving you” (Dt. 11:17). In the same way, the readers of Hebrews have been watered from above. Land + water should = a fruitful crop. But if the recipients of the blessing turn away from Christ, there will only be thorns and thistles, and thus cursing.

Isaiah 5:1-7 is a prophetic parable in which Israel is compared to a fruitless vineyard, as she is about to be exiled from her land as a result of her open and stubborn apostasy. Israel has received every advantage (cf. 5:1-4), and yet still no useful crop is forthcoming (cf. 5:4-6). Instead, “there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain on it” (Isa. 5:6). Thorns, briars, and cessation of rain, of course, all factor into the imagery of Hebrews 6:7-8 and speak of apostasy, curse, and exile.

Thus, the author of Hebrews combines together a network of very rich, provocative, and familiar images to describe his readers’ present situation and future possibilities. This symbolic matrix would have been instantly recognizable (or “audible”) to the original audience. These Jewish Christians are facing a situation similar Israel’s perilous pilgrimage through the wilderness towards the promised land. But more than that, like old covenant Israel, this community has received rain from heaven, and, as a fertilized field, is expected to yield a fruitful crop rather than thorns and thistles. If fruit is not forthcoming, the barren land will be burned.

Echoes of the Exodus in Hebrews 6:4-6

Hebrews 6:4-6 is heavily loaded with intertextual resonances of the exodus motif. Already in 2:1-4 and 3:7-11, the author has alluded to Israel’s wilderness

⁴ The problem with locating an intertextual backdrop for 6:7-8 is that the imagery is so common, it’s almost generic. But the two passages we have linked with 6:7-8 are obviously very relevant to the themes of perseverance and apostasy, and so it would seem we are on secure exegetical footing with these connections.

wandering as a paradigm for describing the present situation of those he addresses. They are a people “on the way,” with Egypt in their rear view mirror and the promised land out ahead of them. They have experienced an exodus, but full entrance into the new creation still awaits them. Within this narrative structure, the description of the benefits they’ve received comes into sharper focus. While they have already entered the eschaton, their possession of eschatological blessings is not yet finalized.

Hebrews 6:4-6 list several blessings the covenant community in view has been given: they were “once enlightened,” they have “tasted the heavenly gift,” they have “become partakers of the Holy Spirit,” and they have “tasted of the good word of God and the powers of the age to come.” Each of these correspond to some benefit that God gave the Israelites under the old covenant, though there is no doubt these analogous blessings are much greater in their new covenant form. The movement from old covenant to new means there is both correspondence *and* escalation. The Christians and the Israelites stand in a symmetrical, parallel relationship, having benefited from analogous acts of redemption, received analogous promises, witnessed similar signs and wonders, and are now facing similar tests, at risk of committing the same kind of apostasy, and are hearing comparable exhortations to perseverance. The typological match is quite evident.

These Jewish Christians are now feeling an alluring pull back to Judaism, most likely back to the temple in Jerusalem. In that respect, they are just like the Israelites who, faced with the difficulties of claiming God’s promises, began to desire to reverse the exodus and return to Egypt (cf. Num. 14:1-4). But in both cases, a return to the old order of things means a return to bondage (cf. Gal. 4:1 on the old covenant as a form of slavery from which God offers redemption in Christ). In the face of those who would say the old way was “better” (cf. Num. 14:3), the writer of Hebrews argues convincingly the new way is, in fact, superior. Indeed, the superiority of Christ over against old covenant personages, institutions, and events becomes the main theme of the book and the hallmark of the author’s theology.

In 6:4-5 he articulates the blessings they will lose if they turn away from Christ, back to the old covenant. Now that the promised Redeemer, the Greater Moses and Joshua, has come, the time of the law has ended. Shadow has given way to reality. The law has reached its end, its built-in expiration point, through Christ. Let’s look closely at the blessings these Hebrew Christians are in danger of forsaking.

“Being enlightened” in 6:4 echoes LXX (the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament in use in the first century) texts that use the same language to describe the pillar of cloud and fire that led Israel in the wilderness (e.g., Ex. 13:21; Ps. 105:39 (104:39); Neh. 9:12, 19). The pillar “enlightened” the Israelites, illuminating their path day and night as they trekked through the wilderness.

The Hebrew Christians have been enlightened in an even greater fashion (cf. Heb. 10:26, 32). The Spirit is now their lamp, leading the way (cf. Heb. 3:7, 10:29).⁵

⁵ Incidentally, this is not the only New Testament text to connect the pillar of cloud and fire with the Spirit. N. T. Wright and Sylvia Keesmaat have both drawn out this connection in Romans and Galatians. See Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections* is pages

The pneumatology of Hebrews has often been overlooked, but close study bears out that the Spirit plays a key role in the theology of the book.⁶ If nothing else, the book's emphasis on the new covenant requires a pneumatological dimension, since the Spirit is so often associated with the eschatological (new) covenant in the prophetic Scriptures (cf. Ezek. 36-37).

Ancient commentators on Hebrews linked this "enlightenment" with baptism. Ample biblical warrant for suggesting this connection is found in Acts 9, where Saul/Paul is baptized, causing the scales to fall from his eyes and ending a three day (!) period of darkness. From at least the second century onwards, "enlightenment" was taken by Christian theologians as a synonym for baptism. Whether or not this is a valid association is an open question, but there are obviously other allusions to baptism in the immediate context (cf. 6:1-2; 6:7-8). If baptism is regarded as an "enlightening," thus culminating and completing the process of conversion, then the question of apostasy becomes particularly sharp. If something significant has happened in baptism, what does that mean for those who clearly fail to live out the grace of baptism? Does it mean their baptisms really weren't effective after all? This passage helps us grapple with those sorts of questions.

"Tasting the heavenly gift" alludes to the manna from heaven that God provided for the wandering Israelites. Here the writer continues to withdraw from the bank of Old Testament motifs and images. Several Old Testament texts speak of God raining down manna from above (e.g., Ex. 16:4), so the language here is apparently drawn from the Septuagint once again. The manna is specifically referred to as God's "gift" from "heaven" in Nehemiah 9:15 and Psalm 78:24 (77:24). The writer, then, is very likely referring to the Lord's Supper, linking the new covenant meal with the old covenant provision, just as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4. The enlightening pillar and heavenly manna (along with water) were frequently identified as the central gifts of God during Israel's period of journeying

393-770 in volume 10 of *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, edited by Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002). Wright says,

In the present passage [Rom. 8:1-11], it becomes clear that the Spirit "indwells" God's people in Christ, as the Shekinah "indwelt" the tabernacle in the wilderness or the Temple in Jerusalem; so we should not be surprised to discover in the following paragraphs that the Spirit takes the role, within the new wilderness wanderings of the liberated people of God, that in the exodus story was taken by the pillar of cloud and fire . . . Paul has retold the story of the exodus, the freedom story, demonstrating that the Egypt of sin and death has been decisively defeated through the death of the Messiah, and that the Spirit is now leading God's redeemed people to their promised inheritance (581, 585).

Wright argues convincingly that the whole exodus story works as Paul's narrative base in Romans 6-8. The movement in Romans 6-8 (with old covenant correspondences) is from slavery to sin (Pharaoh), to rescue in baptism (Red Sea crossing), to struggling with Torah (Israel at Sinai), while following the Spirit's lead (pillar of cloud and fire) on the way towards the new creation (Canaan). Similarly, Keesmaat has identified an exodus narrative substructure in Romans 8 and Galatians 4 in her book *Paul and His Story: (Re)Interpreting the Exodus Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). On the Spirit as the "leader" of the new exodus community, see especially ch. 2.

⁶ See Martin Emmrich's dissertation, published in abbreviated form as *Pneumatological Concepts in the Epistle to the Hebrews: Amtcharisma, Prophet, and Guide of the Eschatological Exodus* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003).

in the wilderness (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-4; Neh. 9:15-20; Ps. 78:14-25; 105:39-40), as God's turned the wilderness into a new garden for his beloved people. These were the means of grace through which God offered life and sustenance to the wilderness community and foreshadowed the blessings of the land.

Of course, the feeding miracles of Jesus also pick up on the theme of bread from heaven and point back to the wilderness provision as well as forward to the Lord's Supper (e.g., Jn. 6:31ff; cf. Mt. 14:15-21; 15:32-38; Mk. 8:1-9; Lk. 9:12-17). The writer of Hebrews is obviously suggesting that the Hebrew Christians will forfeit access to a superior table if they forsake the new covenant (cf. 13:10). They will be giving up their place at the heavenly banquet if they turn away from Christ.

The Old Testament link with "partakers of the Holy Spirit" is not as self-evident because of the obscurity of the Spirit's work in the old aeon. However, Emmrich shows there is a connection:

"Partakers of the Holy Spirit" are those who experience [the Spirit] as the guiding power on their earthly pilgrimage by way of Spirit-inspired utterances and Spirit-induced wisdom . . . Participation in the Spirit bespeaks a genuine experience of God's presence that his people have (and in fact need) on their journey of faith. Thus, when read against the background of the pilgrimage motif, the phrase "partakers of the Holy Spirit" corresponds to God's placing of "Moses' Spirit" on the seventy elders to instruct their contemporaries during the wilderness trek (Num. 11:16-30). Like Israel during the exodus journey, the addressees of the Epistle to the Hebrews have experienced the Spirit's guiding agency in their midst.⁷

Other relevant references include Nehemiah 9:20 and Isaiah 63:11. The Spirit has come with greater intensity and broader scope in the new covenant, to be sure. The gift of the Spirit is now regarded as the Spirit of Jesus rather than the Spirit of Moses, and the Spirit is distributed to the entire covenant community instead of just a subset. But there was an analogous experience of the Spirit under the Mosaic economy, at least on the part of Israel's representatives. By looking at that pre-eschatological work of the Spirit, the Hebrews can learn about their own pneumatological experience. They have been given (finally!) exactly what Moses desired the people of God to receive (Num. 11:29).⁸ In the new covenant, every member of the community is likened unto the helpers of Moses, and even Moses himself, for they have all become bearers of the Spirit.

Then the writer identifies two benefits the group he addresses have "tasted": "the good word of God and the powers of the age to come." Again, our understanding of these benefits is colored by their Old Testamental background. The "age to come" indicates the promised messianic era has been inaugurated. The "world to come" (cf. 2:5) has arrived. In other words, they have experienced eschatological intrusion.⁹

⁷ Martin Emmrich, "Hebrews 6:4-6 – Again! (A Pneumatological Inquiry)," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003), 85.

⁸ There is a great deal of irony here for the original readers of Hebrews. Only by moving beyond the law into the new covenant can they continue to enjoy the same Spirit that Moses and the seventy had under the law.

⁹ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes captures the sense well:

The word and power of the future age have broken into their present historical experience. This is critical because it further demonstrates the typological relationship between what Israel of old enjoyed, and what the new Israel has received. Old covenant Israel experienced a real-but-typological deliverance. In other words, it was a shadow of the eschatological exodus that the new covenant community has now experienced. A greater word and power have been unleashed, but according to the pattern and covenantal structure already laid down in the typological exodus.¹⁰

“Tasting the good word of God” is most likely a metaphor for receiving the preached word of the gospel. This is a frequent Old Testament theme (e.g., Psalm 119:103). In light of Hebrews 2:9, we should not try to minimize the “tasting” metaphor here, as though it indicated something less than full reception. They have not merely received the word in a superficial or external way; it has entered into them, so that they have really and truly experienced its power. They have tasted the goodness of the Lord (cf. Ps. 34:8).

References to the “good word” of God appear a couple of times in Joshua in regard to the promise God made about the land of Canaan (the same Greek terms for “good” and “word” are used in both Joshua and Hebrews; cf. Josh. 21:45 (21:43); 23:15). Specifically, the “word” God has spoken is “good” because it has been fulfilled. He has “made good” on his ancient promises. Again, these echoes are quite

Looked at from the perspective of the Old Testament, this “coming age,” so long expected, has truly dawned with the advent of Christ and the achievement of his work of reconciliation, followed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh. Hence the keynote of the public ministry of Jesus is the proclamation: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mk. 1:14f.). Christ’s coming ushers in “the last days” (cf. Heb. 1:2; Acts 22:16f.; 1 Jn. 2:18; Jude 18). But, at the same time, it is apparent that in the biblical purview the coming of the final age is in two stages; and this conception is closely bound up with the doctrine of the two comings of Christ. At his first coming, Christ by his incarnation, death, and resurrection accomplished all that was necessary for the redemption of the world and the reconciliation of man to God. The new creation is even now taking place in the lives and communities of Christian believers. The principles of the new age are at this moment active through the operation of the Holy Spirit. But the consummation is not yet. The fullness is yet to come. And it will come when Christ appears the second time in the glory of his eternal majesty and his exalted manhood. Meanwhile the Christian, who is being transformed from glory to glory as he is increasingly molded into the likeness of him who is the true Image of God (2 Cor. 3:18), enjoys a genuine experience of the powers of the age to come. The conquest of sin in his own life is the assurance that the triumphant Christ will finally drive out all imperfection, not only from his people but also from the whole of his creation. The believer’s *taste* of the powers of the age to come, real and dynamic though it is, is but a *foretaste* of the glorious banquet which awaits him (cf. 1 Cor. 13:9-12; Acts 3:99-21; Phil. 3:20f.; 2 Pet. 3:13; 1 Jn. 3:2; Rom. 8:18, 23; 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13f.; 1 Pet. 1:4f.; Rev. 7:13ff.; 19:9; 21:1ff.).

See Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 211-12. Hughes overlooks the fact that the phrase “last days” in Hebrews very likely refers to the “last days” of the old covenant order (cf. Heb. 8:13). But his point about the already and not yet of the new age (“the age to come”) is precisely correct.

¹⁰ There is an abundance of literature on the theme of the “new exodus” in the Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah. See most especially Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus and Mark* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997). The exodus is the primary paradigm for understanding God’s acts of redemption.

evident in the Septuagint, the preferred translation of author of Hebrews. It's not a stretch to imagine that the original audience would have picked up on the allusions. They knew they were living in the time of eschatological fulfillment, shadowed previously in history by God's provisional fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises in the generation of Joshua.

We can fill in this sketch a bit more. God's "good word" for Israel was the promise of Canaan. The matrix of land/rest/promise, of course, has already emerged as a major cluster of motifs in Hebrews (cf. chapters 3-4). Here, the writer continues moving in that same narrative thought world. But the "good word" that is being brought to fulfillment in Christ is superior to the word spoken in various times and places in the old world (cf. 1:1-2). Jesus is, after all, the greater Joshua. The recipients of the Epistle to the Hebrews have no excuses if they reject God's good word, as it has been made abundantly clear to them that the new word God has spoken is authentic and powerful. The word of God has been fulfilled; if they abandon Christ, they will cut themselves off from participation in the fulfillment of God's covenant promises.

The word of God, here as elsewhere, is paired up with signs that demonstrate and authenticate the reality and truthfulness of that word (cf. Acts 2:22, 2:43; etc.). "The powers of the age to come" have already been identified in Hebrews 2:1-4, which links the word (2:2-3) with wonders (2:4). God attested to his word given through Moses with signs and miracles (cf. Exodus 2-14; Num. 11:14, 22; etc.). Now he has done the same with the gospel word (cf. miracles in the gospels and Acts) in even more dramatic fashion. The eschatological exodus is modeled after the Mosaic exodus, albeit with greater blessings and curses attached (cf. the "how much more" logic at work in 2:1-4), to match the greater and more powerful signs. God has given ample proof of the veracity of his word. The Hebrews experienced God's epistemological demonstration of his word in a first hand fashion. They have no good reason for rejecting that word.

It is precisely this total package of blessings in 6:4-5 that the readers have [1] received, and [2] are in danger of "falling away" from. Hughes explains how the six blessings are all aspects of a single blessing:

These six blessings have necessarily been discussed separately and in turn, but it is important to realize that they are but different aspects and manifestations of the one great blessing which the reception of the gospel brings. They are components of a unitary experience of evangelical grace in the life of the believer. Certainly it seems scarcely credible that one who has in some definite sense experienced all this should then fall away from this state of blessedness. Yet this is the dreadful possibility envisaged in this passage.¹¹

Emmrich explains how the letter's recipients can be in danger of falling away from the blessings:

The lessons drawn from Israel's rebellion in 3:7ff. were still in the mind of the author when he wrote the third warning (6:4-6). Just as Israel failed to enter the promised land despite the many tokens of God's care for them, the

¹¹ Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 212.

readers of Hebrews are in danger of forfeiting the promise, although their experience had clearly marked them as an eschatological community . . . Again, the events of Kadesh-Barnea come to mind. Israel's rejection by God was sealed when they decided to outdo their constant murmuring (cf. Ex. 15:24-16:3; 17:3) by actually returning to Egypt, i.e., they terminated the pilgrimage prematurely (cf. Num14:1ff). By so doing, they irrevocably relinquished Yahweh's promise as being inferior to what Egypt had to offer. Israel had returned to Egypt, and, in the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, this entailed "throwing away their confidence" (10:35). By the same token, the addressees of Hebrews are warned that they will forfeit the reward if they recapitulate Israel's story by not staying the course to the promised rest.¹²

In the same way that Watergate became the paradigm for all subsequent American political scandals (Conragate, Monicagate, etc.), so Kadesh-Barnea has become the standard model for assessing all later acts of covenant apostasy. The Hebrew Christians are warned about doing precisely what their ancestors did under the Mosaic regime. The new covenant has conditions; covenant breaking is still a possibility. Whatever benefits the new covenant offers over and above the old covenant, until the final resurrection, apostasy remains a live danger for God's people. We must guard ourselves against hardening our hearts (3:8), drifting away (2:1), falling short of the goal (4:3), drawing back (10:39), and so forth. The Hebrew-Christian community should remember Kadesh-Barnea. They should persevere with Christ rather than recapitulate that sad chapter in the history their people. They should strive to relive the conquest of Canaan under Joshua rather than the disaster at the border of the land in Numbers 13-14.

It is because of *unbelief* that the Israelites failed to enter into God's promised rest (3:17-19). Their failure is a failure of obedience to be sure (3:18), but it is an obedience that consists in and emerges from and is intrinsic to *faith* (3:19). Thus, the epistle's sustained call to persevering faith matches and reverses Israel's failure to keep the faith in the wilderness. The journey from Egypt to the promised rest can only be navigated by faith in God's word, following the leadership of the Spirit. This is what it means to "hold fast the confession" (10:23). The key to perseverance is keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, our Pioneer and Victor (cf. Heb. 12:1-4). This is the lesson of Kadesh-Barnea for new covenant saints.

Rain from Heaven, Crop Failure, and Exile in Hebrews 6:7-8

Hebrews 6:7-8 shifts ground a bit but continues to develop the same point. The paradigm is slightly altered, but the flow of the argument itself is seamless. The same covenantal structure is at work. The same eternal issues are at stake.

¹² Emmrich, 'Hebrews 6:4-6 - Again!,' 87. In *Pneumatological Concepts*, Emmrich writes, "Just as Israel failed to enter the promised land despite the many tokens of God's care for them, the readers of the Hebrews are in danger of forfeiting their promised rest, although their experience had clearly marked them out as an eschatological community . . . The Israelites were God's people *so long as* they would persevere in their quest for Canaan" (60-1; emphasis added).

Here the narrative substructure shifts from Israel's wandering in the wilderness towards the land, to a situation in which Israel is already settled in Canaan but threatened with the curse of removal from the land if she rebels. Exile from God's promised rest was the final and definitive curse of the Mosaic order (Deut. 28:64-65).

The agricultural metaphors used by the author, as already noted, appear to be based upon Deuteronomy 11:11 and Isaiah 5:1-7 (though there are certainly other candidates from the Old Testament). Here the connections are more in the realm of motif and symbol than direct verbal intertextualities (so perhaps we should speak of *interconceptuality*), but they need to be reckoned with all the same.

Deuteronomy 11 is part of a larger message from Moses, preparing the people of Israel for life in the land. Because God has redeemed Israel out of Egypt, and because he is bringing them into a land overflowing with abundance, Israel must remain faithful. God informs Israel that the key to maintaining possession of Canaan and prolonging "your days in the land . . . flowing with milk and honey" (11:9) is to "earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the Lord your God and serve Him with all your heart and strength" (11:13). The whole context points to the land as the sphere of blessing. Unlike Egypt, it receives water that comes from above – from heaven itself – rather than from below (11:10-11). The land itself will be a "sacrament" of God's presence, endued with his blessing. But if Israel disobeys, the Lord will "shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land the Lord is giving you" (11:17).

This is not the place to develop a full orbbed biblical-theology of water, but a few things should be noted. The verbal link between Hebrews 6:7-8 and Deuteronomy 11:11 is found at just this point. Both passages speak of the land drinking in heavenly rain, using nearly identical Greek constructions. Deuteronomy 11 sets up a contrast between water from below and water from above. This is part of a larger theological theme running throughout the Scriptures.

Originally, the earth was covered with water (Gen. 1:1-2), and the second and third days of the creation week are largely concerned with God moving water around and putting it in its proper places. On the second day of creation, God divides the waters above (in heaven) from the waters below (on earth), creating vertical space. As God inserts the firmament between the waters, the waters above form a sea-like barrier between God's heaven and earth's heaven.¹³ The waters below are then gathered together on day three so that dry land can emerge, creating horizontal space.

Several deeply symbolic themes arise from these water structures. The earthly water is protological, the heavenly water is eschatological (cf. 1 Cor. 15:44-49; also note Genesis 2:5-6, which indicate the land of Eden was originally watered

¹³ The saints cross over this sea into heaven in Revelation 15. References to these waters above our visible heavens are also found in Psalm 148:4, Ezekiel 1:22, Revelation 4:6, etc. The hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy" makes reference to the "glassy sea" of heaven. For more on the "waters above," see Part 1 of my essay "Jesus' Baptism: Fount of Life," available at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/jesus_baptism_the_fount_of_life.htm.

from below, just as the first man was made from the soil of the earth in 2:7). The waters below become corrupted by Adam's fall into sin (e.g., Rev. 13:1) and now pose a danger if they cross over their appointed boundaries (e.g., Job 38:8). The waters above are symbolized by the chariots of water in Solomon's temple and represent the renewal and transformation of the creation (1 Kings 7:23-26; cf. Ezek. 47, which depicts waters flowing *down* from the temple-mountain). Bounded rivers, flowing down from the mountains above can be linked with the heavenly waters. The Spirit is also repeatedly associated with water, especially the water that comes from above and transforms the barren wasteland into a fruitful paradise (e.g., Isa. 32).

Of course, all of this is linked into the meaning of baptism: throughout Scripture, baptisms are performed with water from above by sprinkling or pouring.¹⁴ Man is made from the dirt of the earth (Gen. 2: 7); in baptism, he drinks in the heavenly rain of the Spirit and becomes a new creation. But the imagery of Hebrews 6:7-8 reminds us there is nothing "automatic" about this. If the water from above is not received in faithfulness, new life will still manifest itself, but in the form of thorns and thistles rather than fruit. Baptism is a gracious starting point, but guarantees nothing apart from faith.¹⁵ Remember, Sodom was once a well watered place as well, but in the end, it was burned up with fire from God's heavenly altar (cf. Gen. 13:10, 19:1-29).

It's been said that Paul grapples with all the "problems" created by a high view of baptismal efficacy in passages like 1 Corinthians 10:1-4. The same could be said of the writer of Hebrews here. If there is indeed an allusion to baptism in 6:7, it is clearly regarded as an efficacious means of grace. And if baptism is an instrument of grace, then we have to deal with the fact that many of the baptized obviously never walk worthily of the calling they have received. Hebrews 6, then, would reinforce a point I have argued elsewhere, namely that baptismal grace is conditional.¹⁶ Baptism grants new life and makes the "soil" of humanity productive. But whether a baptized person brings forth fruit or thorns hinges on his faithful reception of the sacrament.

All of this allows us to integrate the blessings received in 6:4-5 with the metaphor of 6:7-8. In 6:4-5, the author makes a possible reference to baptism ("once enlightened") and a direct reference to the Spirit ("partakers of the Holy Spirit"). In 6:7, he speaks of "rain that comes from heaven." Obviously these are all related. To receive heavenly rain *just is* to become a partaker of the Spirit. The rain is the Spirit, and the Spirit is the rain. And the rain, and therefore the Spirit, must be associated with baptism. Objectively, the water is *always* a blessing to the land. It is inherently

¹⁴ One of the best studies on baptismal mode remains Duane Spencer, *Holy Baptism: Word Keys Which Unlock the Covenant* (Tyler, TX: Geneva Ministries, 1984).

¹⁵ It should be noted here that the "rain that often comes upon it" is present tense. It refers to ongoing rain. Therefore more than baptism must be in view. However, it is still perfectly natural to link the "rain" with baptism, even if the "rain" includes other means of grace as well.

¹⁶ See my essay, "Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition: Past, Present, and Future," available at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/baptismal_efficacy_the_reformed_tradition_past_present_future.htm.

God's good and gracious gift. Baptism is gospel through and through. But if the sacrament of the Spirit and of new life is not received in faith, blessing devolves into curse. The heavenly water becomes a flood of judgment – and of course, another baptismal narrative, Genesis 6-9, makes just that point: the same waters that drowned and destroyed the old world rescued Noah's family and brought them into the new creation (cf. 1 Pt. 3:18-22). Baptism is a two-edged sword.

This is also why water – and baptism – is so often associated with testing. Adam was tested in the Garden of Eden, which was watered by four rivers (Gen. 2:10). Israel's primary tests in the wilderness came at places of water (Ex. 17). The trial by ordeal in Numbers 5 involves water. Immediately after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, he was thrust into the wilderness to face Satan's tests (Mk. 1:9-13). In Hebrews 6:7-8, water also plays a role in testing. The writer says, essentially, "God has watered you. He has planted you in a well watered place. Will you now bear fruit to him?" At their baptisms, they crossed out of Egypt, and into the wilderness, to begin their time of testing.¹⁷ But the water of baptism also makes it possible for the wilderness to be transformed into a fruitful garden, if they walk by faith.¹⁸

Mathewson, then, sums up the way Deuteronomy 11 informs our exegesis of Hebrews 6:7-8:

The covenantal blessings and cursing on the land is placed within the context of the Exodus from Egypt and the subsequent trek through the wilderness. In Deuteronomy 11:2-7, the generation which stands on the verge of entry into the promised land is, in solidarity with their ancestors, enjoined to remember the events they experienced surrounding the Exodus out of Egypt (vv. 2-4), as well as *what God did for them in the wilderness* (v. 5), as a basis for obedience and subsequent blessing on the land. Therefore, the allusion to Deuteronomy 11:11 in Hebrews 6:7-8 continues the wilderness generation motif developed in this section . . .

Like the people in Deuteronomy 11 who witnessed divine provisions during the Exodus and the time of wilderness wandering and will now experience God's provision in the land, the readers of Hebrews 6 have experienced the blessings of vv. 4-6 by virtue of belonging to the new covenant community. Those members of the new covenant community who experience the things articulated in vv. 4-6 and produce the fruit of faith and obedience will receive blessing from God, which corresponds to the covenantal blessing on the land in Deuteronomy 11:13-15. Conversely, those who experience the same things by virtue of their participation in the covenant community but fail to appropriate these blessings and obey will be cursed, corresponding to the covenantal curse in Deuteronomy 11:16-17, 28.

¹⁷ On the link between the Red Sea crossing and Christian baptism, see Psalm 77:16-17 and 1 Corinthians 10:1-4. Wright's commentary on Romans, referred to earlier, makes a compelling case that the Red Sea narrative stands behind Paul's theology of baptism in Romans 6:1-14.

¹⁸ For a more complete discussion of the symbolism of water, see Peter Leithart's lectures from the 1996 Biblical Horizons Conference, *Doorways and Passages*, available from Biblical Horizons, P. O. Box 1096, Niceville, FL 32588. For a briefer treatment, see David Chilton, *Paradise Restored* (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1985), especially 18-21.

Mathewson is right, then, in suggesting that the evocation of their “canonical memory” of Deuteronomy 11 (especially verse 11, but taken in its wider context), with its blessings and curses, would clue the readers in to their precarious situation: they are in danger of recapitulating Israel’s greatest act of apostasy and missing out on the typological counterpart of Israel’s greatest blessing.¹⁹

As noted earlier, Isaiah 5 also stands in the background of Hebrews 6:7-8. This prophetic, covenantal lawsuit against Israel provides a reservoir of stock images from which the writer of Hebrews has drawn to create his own symbolic parable. Isaiah 5:1-7 makes use of a common agricultural motif in which God is the vinedresser, the people are the vineyard, and God’s benefits take the form of soil preparation, fertilizer, and (once again) rain. The question then is: Will the people of God, thus tended to, yield the anticipated harvest of righteousness? In Isaiah 5 the answer is a resounding “No.” It is already too late for Israel. The day of judgment has arrived and exile is imminent. Hebrews 6 draws on these same motifs, but leaves the final outcome open-ended; it is still premature to make a final assessment, and there are reasons to hope for a better end result.

In Isaiah 5, God indicates that he *expected* the nation to bear fruit commensurate with her position in the lush, fertile vineyard (5:2, 4). Israel’s failure was not anticipated (from a covenantal perspective), given all God had done to bless the people. The writer to the Hebrews also *expects* his readers to bear fruit, leading to salvation (6:9). These expectations, of course, only make sense if covenantal grace actually makes it possible for covenant members to be obedient and to persevere. God asks Israel in Isaiah 5:4, “What more could I have done for you?” The Hebrews could just as easily be asked the same question, in light of the blessings ascribed to them in 6:4-5. Total inability/depravity is not an excuse for a covenant member’s failure to walk in obedience.

Even though God (as the plaintiff in Isaiah 5) and the writer to the Hebrews had similar expectations for the covenant community, there is a difference. From the retrospective position of Isaiah 5, the people appear to have reached the point of no return in their barrenness, and thus are ripe for judgment. By contrast, from the prospective perspective of Hebrews 6, the final outcome is still undecided. There is still the possibility of escaping judgment. The people may be teetering towards apostasy, but they have not yet fallen. They are in danger of hardening their hearts; in the writer’s own words, they are “*near* to being cursed.” But (as a good pastor) he immediately adds that he has not yet given up on them. He is confident they will remain true to the covenant and bear fruit accordingly. He continues goading them towards the goal of final salvation, mixing hope with desire, as he encourages them in 6:9-12.

In addition to broad thematic contacts between Isaiah 5 and Hebrews 6, there are also verbal links. In particular, the Septuagint of Isaiah 5:2, 4, and 6 uses the same word for “thorn plants” as Hebrews 6:8. In both passages, the negative side of the covenant is described in the same way. Of course, the allusion to thorns ultimately goes back Genesis 3:19, which also uses the same term in the Septuagint. The soil of the human heart can bring forth two kinds of plants – useful crops or

¹⁹ Mathewson, 221-222.

thorn bushes. Those who are cultivated and watered by God have no excuse for bearing thorns. And they have every incentive for bringing forth good fruit.²⁰

Losing Salvation?

Of course, all this raises a question: are the addressees of 6:4-8 “saved”? This is the question that puts theologians on the horns of an apparently insoluble dilemma. If they are saved, and therefore eternally secure, why bother with the warning? The text is eviscerated of its rhetorical force by way of systematic theology. There is no danger. They cannot possibly fall away. The warning is, at best, a scare tactic, like telling a child that an invisible monster will get him if he doesn’t eat his vegetables.

On the other hand, if they aren’t really saved – if they’ve only become acquainted with these blessings in an external and superficial way, or if the blessings themselves constitute something less than “salvation” -- why exhort them to perseverance, as the writer does elsewhere (e.g., 6:1)? Instead they’d be in need of initial conversion, and the call to persevere would itself be a perverse and confusing pastoral strategy.

In response, note that the language itself begs to be taken as *actual* rather than *hypothetical*. Hughes explains:

The danger of apostasy, it must be emphasized, is real, not imaginary; otherwise this epistle with its high sounding admonitions must be dismissed as trifling, worthless, and ridiculous. Certainly in our author’s judgment, the situation is one of extreme gravity. He is addressing readers whose loss of confidence and whose flagging will to persevere in the Christian race (10:35f; 12:3, 12) point alarmingly to the possibility of their dropping out of the contest altogether, and in doing so of placing themselves beyond all hope of restoration . . .

What in any case would be the point of warning them of the danger of apostasy and then assuring them that, after all, they are in no danger of falling into apostasy? Any such procedure would be self-defeating.²¹

Emmrich makes it clear that we cannot solve the theological riddle of 6:4-8 by simply saying the addressees are not genuine Christians:

We may be sure then the author did not see himself as writing to a congregation that consisted entirely of unconverted individuals. 10:29-32 makes clear that he was willing to level with his readership as Christians (cf. also 6:9-12). It would also be awkward for the author to persistently urge his readers on to perseverance when he did not regard them as Christians. In that case, what was it that they were to persevere in/for?²²

²⁰ For further thoughts on the covenant lawsuit found in Isaiah 5:1-7, see my essay, “What More Could I Have Done?” found at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/what_more_could_i_have_done.htm.

²¹ Hughes, 206-7, 212.

²² Emmrich, “Hebrews 6:4-6 – Again!,” 88.

Perseverance is the issue, *not* the authenticity of their past experience of grace or their previous record of obedience (cf. 6:9-12, 10:32-35). Their need is *not* for true conversion, but for patient endurance (10:36).

De Silva makes the same case:

The debate often hinges, however, on the attempt to determine whether or not this group of people has experienced “salvation.” Are they “saved” individuals who then “lose” their salvation, or are they merely semiconverts who fall away, so that the doctrine of “eternal security” is not impugned by this passage? This debate demonstrates the ways in which the ideology of interpreters may override the ideology of the author of the text, constructing a foreign framework that inevitably distorts the author’s meaning.²³

If the razor’s edge of scholasticism is allowed to slice apart the “truly converted” from those who are genuinely in danger of apostasy, by putting the addressees of Hebrews 6 definitively in one or the other of these categories, the plain meaning of the words of the text unravel rather quickly. Simply put, the people in question are *both* “truly” converted *and* in danger of apostasy in the eyes of the author. There is no other way to look at the passage, unless we make it say either less or more than it actually does.²⁴ Again, DeSilva is helpful:

If the author would not characterize the people described in 6:4-5 as “saved” (or “unsaved” for that matter), how does he present them, and would the hearers view them? They are people who have received God’s gifts, who have benefited from God’s generosity (God’s “grace,” meaning God’s favorable disposition to give benefits). Indeed, the author presents a striking accumulation of divine benefits, creating several categories of their experience of God’s generosity so as to make that generosity all the more impressive and the obligation of gratitude all the more pressing . . .

The subjects of 6:4-5 are clearly described in terms of the reception of benefits. They have been graced by God in this variety of ways, being granted great privileges and promises, as well as proofs of their patron’s good will toward them. The repetitive use of the plural participles to designate these people at once creates the impression of the wide variety of the benefits they have enjoyed as well as the rich supply of those benefits. Repetitive texture here serves to underscore the extent of God’s generosity toward them – the care and persistence with which God has cultivated their gratitude – and

²³ David A. DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 220. This is not a denial that Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture. But using Scripture to interpret Scripture does not mean using our favorite texts to mute to the more troubling ones. This is often what happens, and the Epistle to the Hebrews usually gets the short end of the stick. Integration between say, Hebrews 6:4-8 and John 10:29, is possible, but may take more nuance and leave more mystery than we are accustomed to in our systematic theology.

²⁴ It is precisely at this point that Mathewson’s otherwise helpful article fails to deal adequately with the passage. On several occasions (220, 223, 224, 225), he speaks as though those described in 6:4-8 have *already* rebelled and fallen away. But this is not what the text actually says. Falling away is a possibility – but then again, so is perseverance (cf. 6:9). Thus, Mathewson wrongly concludes that the people described in 6:4-6 must be unbelievers. For Emmrich’s critique of Mathewson, see “Hebrews 6:4-6 – Again!,” 87-88.

hence to amplify the disgrace and injustice of shirking the obligations of the patron-client bond that divine generosity created.²⁵

Or, to put it in terms derived from our exegesis of the categories used to describe their present blessing, he addresses them as the people of the new (or eschatological) exodus.

It makes no sense to say that if these people in view apostatize that they were never really covenant members, or had never really experienced God's rescue from sin in the new exodus. That totally breaks the analogy with old covenant Israel. Surely no one doubts that the Israelites who perished in the wilderness were truly part of the covenant people! Surely no one doubts they were delivered from Egypt (cf. Jude 5)! Indeed, it is precisely these blessings that form the basis of the appeal God makes to them (cf. Isaiah 5:1-7). If they apostatize, they will be doing so in the face of all kinds of graces and privileges.

Of course, this raises a whole host of questions about the interrelationship between covenant and salvation, between present blessing and future glory. First, note that "covenant membership" = "elected to final salvation" is a false equation. Not all who are in the covenant persevere to the end. Some break covenant. That's the whole point of the warnings in Hebrews and elsewhere. Just as married man who cheats on his wife and then gets served divorce papers was *really* married, so too those who apostatized were *really* covenanted to God, for better or for worse. And God is not hesitant to divorce them (cf. Jer. 3:8) when they break his covenant by turning to serve another god. The covenant people have experienced salvation in its initial form; they must now persevere in those blessings to enter final salvation at the last day. And, of course, that perseverance itself is a gift of grace, lest any man should boast. Why some covenant members break the covenant, while other persevere, is a mystery known only unto God, but the former must be blamed on the apostates themselves, while credit for the latter goes exclusively to God.

The key to solving the enigma of Hebrews 6:4-8 is found in taking the text at face value and then asking the right questions, while rejecting the wrong questions. Emmrich is exactly right when he points out that once we ask if the addressees of 6:4-8 are "saved" or not, we create all kinds of irksome questions that simply cannot be answered. He explores the issue in much the same way I did in my earlier essay:

What then are we to make of this conundrum? While we may not have all the *answers* to the vexing problems surrounding the exegesis of our text, we can avoid asking the wrong *questions*. Certainly the passages in Hebrews were never designed to investigate the "can-true-believers-fall-away?" kind of inquiry. Our use of predications such as "true/genuine" or "false" is itself obstinately wrong and incurs suspicion of importing alien concepts into our text. Based on the predominant analogy with Israel's experience in the wilderness, we can be quite sure that the author did not at all think in what for him would have been artificial categories of "true/false believers." The Israelites were God's people possessing the divine promise so long as they would persevere in their quest for Canaan. From the vantage point of the

²⁵ DeSilva, 222, 225. Note that the obligation created by grace only works if grace has in fact been really and truly extended to those in view.

pilgrims there was only the generation that did enter the land and the generation that gave up on the pilgrimage. But for Moses' contemporaries to call them "true/false" Israelites would have been as gratuitous as it is to discriminate between true and false believers among the readers of Hebrews . . . The audience "relives," as it were, Israel's pilgrimage, and, by definition, the community of pilgrims is recruited from those who set out and *on the way*. Thus, the members of the congregation qualify as *believers* because (or as long as) they are *pilgrims*. No further distinction is intended until they decide to separate from the wandering people of God. But for the pilgrims, there can be no such turning back without also losing the promise of consummation.²⁶

The solution is to *admit that there is no solution*.²⁷ The way to handle Hebrews 6:4-8 is not to process it through a grid of systematic theology. If we do so we end up saying something about the readers that the writer does not say because any systematic grid will force us to answer the question, "Are these people genuinely saved?" In Hebrews 6:4-8, we are in the realm of pastoral theology. Just as a theologian will go wrong and miss the point if he tries to answer the question of Isaiah 5:4, so we will go wrong if we try to force Hebrews 6 to answer questions it does not presuppose and was not designed to handle. Systematic theologians may not like being told certain parts of the Bible are "off limits" to them, but that's essentially what we must say.²⁸ Or to put it another way, systematicians must make

²⁶ Emmrich, "Hebrews 6:4-8 – Again!," 88-89. Emmrich's point that "no further distinction" is to be made in this passage, other than the distinction that works itself out over time, as some persevere and other don't, is exactly what I had in view in my earlier essay when I spoke of "undifferentiated grace" in the covenant community.

²⁷ DeSilva (244) makes this same point:

We should not make Hebrews 6:4-8 have less force than it did for its first hearers, and many discussions of the passage written from the perspective of a conviction of "eternal security" seek to do exactly that. The text assumes the possibility that a person can fall away after receiving God's gifts, and after participating as fully as anyone can in what blessings of the next age are open for our experience in this age. With the cultural context of patronage and reciprocity a course that brings open disgrace to the benefactor who has in all things acted reliably and nobly should be regarded as the ultimate crime against goodness, a vice for which there are no remedies nor sufficient penalties . . .

These considerations are offered in the hope that a long-standing problem in biblical theology may be settled – in favor of not attempting to settle it! Once the tension is resolved one way or the other, the beauty of grace, as both God's favor and our response, is threatened. The enterprise of biblical theology, particularly when the goal is to reduce the dynamics of a living God's relating with his creation to a logical, systematic order, may be fundamentally at odds at this point with the creative and necessary paradoxes and tensions of living relationships . . . Favor is always fresh, always unmerited, always surprising, never to be taken for granted – and never to go unrequited!

²⁸ Of course, as I noted previously, if the systematician shares the approach of Cornelius Van Til, then he can incorporate Isaiah 5:4 and Hebrews 6:4-8 into his "system" without too much trouble because the system is admittedly open ended and not designed to answer all questions. Our "system" of theology strives to be analogical reproduction of God's "system" on a creaturely level, but only God has a "closed system" because only God is all-knowing. Our systems are always incomplete and open to revision, and we may never iron out all the apparent tensions and paradoxes we find in Scripture's system of truth. It is better to humble our minds before Scripture and live with paradox, than resolve

sure they do not force texts like Hebrews 6:4-8 to answer *their* questions, rather than those of the original writer and audience.

As Emmrich says, we should not approach Hebrews 6:4-6 trying to distinguish “true” Israelites from “false” Israelites. Rather there are Israelites who belong to the generation that perished in the wilderness and Israelites who belonged to the generation that successfully invaded Canaan. But note that *both* groups of Israelites have precisely the same redemptive story in their past. The difference is found in their future, that is, what they do *after* having undergone the exodus rescue (cf. Deut. 6:20-25; 7:1-11). Their *initial* deliverance is the same; the differentiation comes *later on*, when some persevere and others don’t.²⁹ Again, this is why my earlier article used the category of “undifferentiated grace.”³⁰

Crucifying Jesus All Over Again?

One of the most intriguing and troublesome features of Hebrews 6:4-6 is the claim that those who fall away will find it *impossible* to renew their repentance because to do so would be to crucify the Son of God all over again. I already speculated on why I think the apostasy in view here is irreversible (see endnote 2 in my previous article). My hunch is that this epistle is addressed to Jewish Christians (likely priests, since they should have already become teachers, per 5:12) who are being pressured to return to the temple in Jerusalem and defend it against the coming invasion of the Romans. If they do so, they will die at the hands of the Roman soldiers – thus making a second repentance impossible.

Of course, the fact that the writer speaks of “renewing” repentance means that those in view in these verses *really* did repent at some point. This a further line of argument for the genuineness of their Christian experience. The problem is not that they have never *truly* repented; the problem is that *after* truly repenting, if they abandon that first repentance, they will not be able to repent again.

the paradox prematurely by leaving bits and pieces of Scripture on the cutting room floor. The point of Hebrews 6 is not to satisfy our curiosity about how eternal security works; the point is to prick us to persevere in the faith. If we do the latter, the text has done its work.

²⁹ We could press the point even further by noting that some spies actually entered into the land of promise, before shrinking back and perishing in the wilderness. They “tasted of the age to come” when they brought back produce from the bounty of Canaan (Num. 13). But they later fell away and they never got to actually dwell in Canaan as a permanent possession.

³⁰ In other words, the categories “common grace” and “special grace” are not adequate. Peter Leithart already noticed the need for a kind of “middle grace” to account for the fact that many non-Christians are influenced by the church and the Bible; in other words, there is often a blurring between the contributions and products of special and common forms of grace in a Christianized (or even semi- or once-Christianized culture). See his two essays, “Did Plato Read Moses? Middle Grace and Moral Consensus” and “Natural Law: A Reformed Critique,” both available Biblical Horizons, P. O. Box 1096, Niceville, FL 32588. In the same way, I would suggest a category of “covenantal grace,” that is, a grace belonging to both covenant members who will persevere and those who won’t. It is grace belonging to all who are members of the visible church, which is “the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God” (WCF 25.2). This is what WCF 10.4 seems to have in mind when it speaks of “common operations” of the Spirit. These are operations of the Spirit that belong to both those who keep covenant and those who will eventually break covenant.

As I noted before, this passage is also tied to the “unpardonable sin” texts in the gospels (e.g., Mt. 12:31-32). Crucifying the Son of God a second time in 6:6 is equivalent to insulting the Spirit of grace in 10:29. The Jews rejected Christ the first time he visited Israel in his earthly ministry. They crucified him. But if they reject him in his second visitation, in the Spirit after Pentecost (cf. Jn. 14:16-18), they will not be able to repent. They will have closed their eyes in the face of too much light; such an action shows an irremediable hardness of heart on their part.

This is in fact precisely what many Jews did. The crowds flocked to hear Jesus and participate in his earthly ministry. Many even clustered in and around the early church and the apostles. But when confronted with Jesus’ radical kingdom agenda, with the cost of discipleship, and the cruciform pattern of life he demanded, they shrunk back. Many of these, no doubt, became the very Jews who so vigorously persecuted the early church. Indeed, through their persecution of the early Christians, they actually persecuted (recrucified?) Christ himself (cf. Acts 9:4). The book of Acts, in part, was written to make just this point. Luke introduces his second volume by saying that his “former account” was a record of all that Jesus “*began* to both do and teach” during his earthly ministry. The point, then, is that Acts is a *continuation* of what Jesus did and taught, this time through the Spirit and the apostles, from the Father’s right hand in heaven.

Thus, we find that every major Christian leader in the book of Acts undergoes an experience that basically matches up to the gospel record of Jesus’ own life and ministry. The stories of Stephen, Peter, and Paul, in particular, take the same shape as Jesus’s own story. They bear the imprint of their master. Their “shame” is his “shame” (cf. Acts 5:41 and Hebrews 13:13).³¹ Thus, to flesh out one case, Stephen, like Jesus, is full of faith and power, doing great signs and wonders, and speaking with wisdom that confounds his opponents (6:8, 10). Like Jesus, he is opposed by the Jews, especially because he spoke out against the temple and the law (6:14), resulting in trumped up blasphemy charges from trumped up witnesses (6:11-13). Stephen, like Jesus, is murdered outside the city, but prays for his persecutors in his dying moments (7:60). Stephen, like Jesus, uses Moses against his adversaries who think that Moses is on their side (7:1-53). Like Jesus at his baptism and Transfiguration, Stephen sees heaven opened up (7:55-56). Even the final prayer of Stephen matches the last words of Jesus (7:59). Because he is filled with the Spirit, Stephen is like another Jesus (6:3, 7:55); in confronting him, the Jews are confronting Jesus all over again. It’s a “second coming” of sorts.³²

³¹ Some scholars have noted a verbal echo of Numbers 25:4 here, since the offenders in that narrative text were hung shamefully on trees before the Lord. Certainly, this is just the kind of shame that the Lord himself underwent to redeem his people from the curse of death; he is not to be exposed to such shame again, and will take vengeance on behalf of his people when they wrongfully suffer shame of this sort. However, the story of Numbers 25 is not clearly related to the situation addressed in Hebrews, beyond the rather obvious point that the shame apostates hoped to heap on Christ falls back on their own heads.

³² If Jewish-Christian apostates are the “thorns” that spring up from the well-watered ground, it may also shed light on Matthew 13:7, 22. Perhaps the “thorns” choking out the gospel seed are specifically apostate Jews who lured their brethren away from the truth of Christ and back to a Jewish way of life centered around false promises of wealth (cf. Heb. 10:34 for evidence that Jews who converted to

If this “double witness” theory is correct it sheds a lot of light on the unique nature of the apostasy in view. While covenant breaking is certainly still a possibility, it seems that we would almost never have reason to think someone’s apostasy is irremediable, like that of first century Jews. Ordinarily, we should not give up on apostates. In treating them like “Gentiles and tax collectors” (Mt. 18:17), we should minister to them in love and humility, praying for their restoration. Hebrews 6:4-6 is not timeless; it is deeply embedded in a unique redemptive-historical context.

This is critical because it was precisely misuse of Hebrews 6:4-6 that kept the book’s canonicity in question for centuries. The Novatians used 6:4-6 to argue that those who lapsed during times of imperial persecution could not be restored. The church rejected the Novatian position as overly strict/legalistic, and therefore *almost* rejected Hebrews as a whole. If the reading offered here is on the right track, the reading of the Novatians was badly mistaken and the church was right to include Hebrews in the canon as consistent with the rest of the biblical testimony.

Don’t Stop Believing!

So this is the picture: the addressees of Hebrews 6:4-8 have been genuinely converted.³³ They have received a package of benefits that are analogous to, but far greater than, those blessings Israel received as a wilderness community. And while so much has been given to them, they still stand in need of future perseverance. This future perseverance cannot be logically deduced from anything they’ve received in the past; it remains a matter of faith, promise, and gift. And if they turn away from Jesus, they will not only cease persevering, they will fall into the hands of the God who is a consuming fire (12:29).

Hebrews 6, in a sense, then, presents a fork in the road to every Christian who reads it. It asks us: “What will you do? Which way will you turn? Will you carry on in the faith, with all its benefits and challenges? Or will you shrink back and go another path – a path that in the end can only lead to judgment?” In that sense, Hebrews 6 is no different than those Old Testament texts in which God sets before Israel a choice between obedience/blessing and disobedience/cursing (e.g., Deut. 28-30; Josh. 24). In one sense, this choice confronts every Christian every day. We must persevere with God by faith day by day.

Christianity often faced material impoverishment). This would not exclude other readings of the parable, but it is worth exploring.

³³ I recognize there are theological contexts in which adverbs like “genuinely” and “truly” would include “perseveringly.” Thus, apostates were never (in the nature of the case) “genuinely” or “truly” converted (cf. WCF 10.4). I have no desire to dispute over words. In saying that apostates may be “genuinely” or “truly” converted, I am simply indicating their temporary experience of God’s grace is authentic. I am not suggesting that their apostasy is outside God’s eternal decree; God knows who belongs to him eternally because salvation is his work from inception to consummation. I am also not ruling out qualitative differences all along the way between those who will persevere in the covenant and those who will break the covenant, though I’d quickly add that Scripture in general, and Hebrews in particular, seems quite uninterested in spelling out those differences in any kind of psychological or experiential precision, leaving them more theoretical in nature.

Emmrich argues, as I did in my previous treatment of this text, that such a “covenantal” reading does not undermine divine sovereignty or irresistible grace.³⁴ This exegesis can be squared with Calvinism, provided we are willing to work at it in a nuanced fashion. Indeed, Emmrich employs the same basic distinctions I did when he speaks of a “divine perspective” on salvation and a “pastoral perspective.”³⁵ Some biblical texts (e.g., Rom. 8:29-30) “afford a window into the very mind and eternal purposes of God,” while others (such as those in Hebrews) give a covenantal/pastoral window shaped by history, preaching, sacraments, visible community membership, and so forth.

Accordingly, the author does not pretend to know to be able to know the hearts of his addressees so as to distinguish their ultimate spiritual condition. He does know, however, that some of them are ready to throw in the towel and disown Christ. The author refuses to break these “bruised reeds” and fronted with the looming danger of losing the blessings (and so the promise) pertaining to the eschatological community should they apostatize after Israel’s [“pattern of disobedience,” 4:11].

Thus, the warning keeps its full pastoral and rhetorical force:

The very last thing he wants to do is to sing songs of “eternal security” to these faltering pilgrims as though their decision for or against Christ could have no eternal consequences. No, they must be warned against the horrific corollary of exposing the Son to ridicule. For instead of bearing his reproach (cf. 3:13), they would thus join hands with those who put him to shame (cf. 12:2).³⁶

But, of course, “eternal security” is a reality, provided we claim God’s promises about perseverance in faith, rather than presuming upon them. Assurance is possible by looking to Christ as the Author *and Finisher* of our faith (12:1-4). Even in the present wilderness situation, we can take possession of the promised land in faith. We can have confidence and assurance (cf. Heb. 10:22, 35).

Another way to stylize their experience theologically is to speak of the *already* and the *not yet*. Already, the Hebrew Christians have experienced a taste of the blessings of the eschaton. But these eschatological blessings remain provisional in some form or fashion.

The momentum of the first three warning passages (especially 6:4-6) revolves around the *realized* blessings of the eschaton already enjoyed by the community. Knowing what they know and having experienced what they experienced as followers of Christ, whose advent signaled God’s final “word” of redemption, entails tremendous responsibility. The epitome of the blessings is that God, based upon the Son’s atoning sacrifice, is in the midst of his wandering people (cf. Ex. 29:45-46). The divine presence is most eminently shown through the word of the gospel and signs of various kinds.

³⁴ Emmrich, “Hebrews 6:4-6 – Again!,” 89.

³⁵ I wrote of “decretal” and “pastoral” perspectives.

³⁶ Emmrich, “Hebrews 6:4-6 – Again!,” 89.

But God is also active among the people through the agency of the Holy Spirit.³⁷

Those are the blessings *already* enjoyed by the Hebrew-Christian community.

But there remains a “not yet” for the people of God even in the new covenant. And it precisely in this gap between the “already” and the “not yet” that the possibility of apostasy emerges. God is with the Hebrew Christians in the form of his Spirit. And yet possession of the Spirit, in some mysterious sense, remains conditional. As Emmrich says, the gift of the Spirit “does not appear to be final.” He explains:

Now, if our conclusion is correct, then all of the blessings enumerated in Heb. 6:4-6 – including the gift of the Spirit – can be forfeited under the conditions discussed so far . . . Redemption in Hebrews is presented as a to-be-maintained dialogue, and there is no such thing here as “eternal security” apart from the believer’s cooperation in cultivating the divine means of grace (cf. Heb. 10:36, 39). Consequently, if a (former) member of the community has apostatized and thus treated the Spirit of grace with contempt (10:29), there is no more ground for any continuing salvific work of the Spirit, as there is no more sacrifice for sin left to atone for the individual: since Christ’s self-offering is definitive, all the graces that flow from it are unrepeatable (cf. 7:27; 9:26; 10:26). Judgment is the apostate’s expectation (10:27, 30).³⁸

Emmrich goes on to explain that this conditional possession of the Spirit squares perfectly with the author’s covenantal framework. Throughout the Old Testament, the Spirit is seen as a conditional possession, contingent on obedience. God threatened to remove his presence from the Israelite camp after the committed idolatry with the golden calf (Ex. 32-33). Saul had the Spirit, but it was taken from him after he acted unfaithfully (1 Sam. 16:14). Samson “lost” the Spirit after the dalliance with Delilah (Judg. 16:20).³⁹ In short, the view that “possession/retention of the Spirit is contingent on obedience” was a common feature of both traditional Jewish pneumatology as well as at least some strata of the New Testament (e.g., Acts 5:32).⁴⁰

³⁷ Emmrich, “Hebrews 6:4-6 – Again!,” 89-90.

³⁸ Emmrich, “Hebrews 6:4-6 – Again!,” 90.

³⁹ Emmrich, “Hebrews 6:4-6 – Again!,” 90.

⁴⁰ At this point, I must also register my disagreement with Emmrich since he concludes that the writer of Hebrews must have a decidedly different pneumatology than the apostle Paul, “where there is no hint of [Jewish] retributive nuances, let alone the irrevocable forfeiture of the Spirit’s presence” (95). I think Emmrich’s view of Paul is seriously flawed at this point. I would counter his assertion on at least three grounds. [1] A strong case can be made (not the least, on linguistic /stylistic and historical grounds) that Paul is actually the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. If so, Emmrich’s attempt to pit Paul versus Hebrews resolves into pitting Paul against himself. [2] While the acknowledged Pauline letters may not focus on the lose-ability of the Spirit in just the same way that Hebrews does, Paul nonetheless has a strong doctrine of covenant conditionality and apostasy (e.g., Rom. 11). It is not a stretch to say that many, if not most all, of Paul’s apostasy texts entail a “retributive pneumatology,” whether explicit (admittedly rare) or implicit (more frequent). [3] There are at least two passages where, at least by analogy, Paul would seem to indicate that he believes the Spirit is a conditional gift: 1 Corinthians 6 and 10. In 1 Corinthians 6, the background is the presence of God indwelling Israel’s temple. Now, Paul says, the body of the Christian is the Spirit’s temple. But the divine presence could, and in fact did, forsake the temple precincts in Jerusalem due to

[T]his means that the pilgrims must persevere on their journey for the Spirit to remain with them. If they refuse to stay the course, the gift of the Spirit will be irrevocably lost, along with all the other blessings both realized as well as reserved for the wandering people of God. In fact, it is this blending of [then] current concepts of the Spirit with the pilgrimage motif that marks the author's pneumatology in the first three warning passages. The Spirit is the guide of the eschatological exodus. Wherever and whenever the pilgrimage is terminated the work of the Spirit ceases. The author of Hebrews has thus introduced a notable innovation to the above retributive concepts. Jewish texts that deal with the possession/retention of the Spirit do not suggest that the departure of the Spirit is definitive. After all, the gift of [the Spirit] hinges on Christ's once-for-all sacrifice; without this atoning foundation the salvific work of the Spirit cannot continue for the apostate. And because Christ's sacrifice has been positively rejected (which sacrifice is unrepeatable), and the Christian pilgrimage has been terminated, there is no ground for the Spirit ever to resume his work in the apostate, so as to re-institute him as one of the wandering people of the eschatological exodus.⁴¹

In other words, the basis of our participation in the life of the Spirit is found in our faith-wrought union with Christ. But if we break faith with Christ, the union is severed and the Spirit is lost. The only ground for our possession of the Spirit is found in Christ; outside of Christ, there is no Spirit, no life, no hope of salvation.

Finally, we should note that in the book of Hebrews, "salvation" language takes on an eschatological ("not yet") cast. While these believers have already entered the salvation process, they are not saved in the full sense until the eschaton arrives in completion and consummation. DeSilva explains:

Are the people described in 6:4-5 "saved" individuals in the estimation of the author of Hebrews? They cannot be since "salvation" is, for this author, the deliverance and reward that awaits the faithful at the return of Christ. Those who have trusted God's promise and Jesus' mediation are "those who are about to inherit salvation," a deliverance ("salvation") that comes at Christ's second coming (9:28). Noah was not saved when he began to build the ark; he was saved when he finished, stocked, and boarded the ark (and, even, more especially, when he found himself still alive after the flood). The deliverance offered by the Son is indeed "eternal" (5:9), but this "eternal

defilement (cf. Ezek. 10; Mt. 23:38). If the Corinthian Christians join their bodies to harlots, there is reason to think the Spirit will pack his bags and move out. 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 is actually extremely close to the perspective of Hebrews, as it uses the wilderness generation as an analogy with first century Christians. The Jews had Spiritual food and drink. In other words, they had contact with the Spirit in the wilderness through their appointed means of grace. The same is true of the Corinthian church, in baptism and the Lord's Supper. But just as some of those in wilderness violated the Spirit's presence and perished in the wilderness, so the Corinthians must guard themselves from presumption and idolatry, lest they too drive the Spirit away and perish under God's curse. The warning of 1 Corinthians 10 is precisely like that found in Hebrews.

⁴¹ Emmrich, "Hebrews 6:4-6 – Again!," 94. I'm not sure I can agree with what Emmrich says about the irreversibility of apostasy here, since he seems to make the specific, redemptive-historical point of Hebrews 6:4-6 universal. But the connection he draws between possession of the Spirit and perseverance is exactly correct.

salvation” is what the obedient believers look forward to inheriting and enjoying, specifically on the day when the Son comes to judge the world and reward his junior sisters and brothers who have maintained their trust in and loyalty toward him in a hostile world.⁴²

This is not to say “eternal salvation” in the future in Hebrews cannot give rise to “eternal security” in the present. Indeed, the writer of Hebrews makes very strong statements about assurance (e.g., Heb. 10:22, 35). We can *know* that we will be saved at the last day even in the present. But for the writer to the Hebrews, this rock solid assurance is always a matter of faith, not sight or experience or logic. We are *trusting* God for the future because we do not yet see the full realization of his promises. The warnings in Hebrews only present problems for assurance if we import decretal notions of “salvation” and “security” into the text’s covenantal and pastoral framework. “Salvation” in the theology of Hebrews is the final, happy chapter in a story of persevering by faith along a difficult, but promise-filled path. Our present experience of salvation unfolds against the backdrop of Christ’s finished work and against the foreground of Christ’s promise to consummate all things on the day of his appearing. It is within this Christ-shaped tension between the *already* and the *not yet* that we must learn to configure our lives in terms of Christ’s cross and Christ’s coming. That’s the challenge of Hebrews 6:4-8 for today’s church.

The Shape of Salvation and the Shape of the Argument

Now we must seek to draw the strands of argument together, and tie this view of Hebrews 6 into classic Reformed exegesis of the passage. Hebrews 6:4-6 uses a basic covenantal structure, totally analogous to Old Testament covenantal texts. The pattern is simple: God has redeemed his people in an initial way; those people have reciprocated in faith and obedience; and now those same people must persevere in order to enter the final phase of God’s salvation. The sequence is: inaugurated salvation/new exodus -> pilgrimage/perseverance -> final salvation/rest.

Of course, we know from both Scripture and experience that some in the covenant community will persevere and others won’t. Those who do so have no grounds for boasting; after all, they persevered *by faith* and faith is antithetical to self-boasting because it is, by definition, reliance upon the strength and support of another. Those who persevere cannot take credit because God has enabled and empowered their journey every step of the way. Meanwhile, those who fall away cannot blame God, as though his redemptive work was somehow defective. From a decretal perspective, we may say that God has withheld persevering grace from them; but covenantally, God can ask them, as he asked Israel of old, “What more could I have done?” The covenantal grace offered and given to them was sufficient. There are deep mysteries here, to be sure, but we must not shrink back from them if we are to be faithful to God’s whole counsel.

It simply will not do to posit that those addressed in Hebrews 6:4-8 are “secretly unregenerate Christians” or “merely external Christians.” In fact, the entire

⁴² DeSilva, 221.

internal/external dualism quickly deconstructs when examined in light of biblical presuppositions. There is no sharp dichotomy between the inner life and the external life. Western culture's popular anthropological dualism owes more to Plato and Descartes than anything in the Scriptures. Peter Leithart has pointed out how flawed this notion is again and again. "Christianity," as something purely inward, is an invention of secularists, only accepted by the church at the price of the privatization of religion.

Scripture makes no hard or absolute demarcation between inner and outer. When people eat and drink, Scripture says their "souls" are refreshed (e.g., 1 Sam. 30:12), and exterior discipline of our children purges foolishness from their hearts (Prov. 22:15). So, outer events invade the inner life. And, inner things come to outer expression, for out of the thoughts of the heart come murders, adulteries, and other evils (Mk. 7:20-23). The mere fact that the Bible often names the "inner" man by reference to bodily organs (heart, kidneys, liver) is a hint that Scripture does not sharply distinguish inner spiritual from outer physical realities; even the "inner" man is conceived physically, not as an unbodied, ghostly self. Scripture thus teaches a complex interplay of inner/outer in human existence, a duality within unified human being. There is more to us than appears on the surface, but human being is always "being in the world" because it always means "being a body."⁴³

Thus, we must deal with the warning in Hebrews 6:4-8 holistically. It describes the blessings the Hebrew Christians have actually received, not just externally or formally, but internally and truly. Possession of these blessings qualify one for eternal salvation, provided they are accompanied by perseverance. But possession of these blessings does not make perseverance a "given."

The writer of Hebrews exhorts the congregation to move on towards completion (or maturity) in 5:12-6:1, retracing basic elements of biblical teaching in 6:1-3. Then, in 6:4-8, he shows what happens if they stop short of that goal. But the whole flow of the argument presupposes that the readers have undergone a "genuine" conversion, that is, an authentic experience of God's grace. This experience has come through the means of grace, as the allusions to preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper in 6:4-8 indicate. But, again, it's not a matter of mere outward contact with God's favor; the exhortations to perseverance found throughout the book presuppose that the Hebrew Christians have the "heart of the matter," so to speak. Perseverance, not true conversion, is the point in question.⁴⁴

⁴³ Peter Leithart, *Against Christianity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 77-8.

⁴⁴ This is further borne out by the fact that nowhere in the book of Hebrews, much less any other text of Scripture, are we provided with a checklist for distinguishing real, enduring faith from temporary faith. More often than not, the proof is in the perseverance of the one and its lack in the other. This is not to say there are no qualitative differences between a faith that will persevere and a faith that will flicker out, but it's hard to see how those differences play any vital pastoral role *in Scripture*. The biblical authors don't exhort us to examine our past experience to see if we *really* acted authentically at our conversion; instead they exhort to *present* and *future* trust and repentance. Even self-examination in Scripture (e.g., 2 Cor. 13:5) is of the community's present posture towards Christ, not their past experience.

This is not an altogether novel interpretation of the passage. While Calvin does not deal with all the specifics in just the way we have here, and while his theology of apostasy is not always as robust as it could be, his basic approach is similar. Regarding Hebrews 6:4-8, Calvin writes that the author “threatens with the severest vengeance of God all those who would cast away the grace which had been once received.” Calvin acknowledges that the sin of apostasy must be distinguished from other specific sins that do not violate the covenant. He says there is “twofold falling away,” one particular (that is, some isolated act of sin), the other general (that is, a total abandonment of the gospel):

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 . . . For he who violates the second table of the Law, or transgresses the first through ignorance, is not guilty of this defection; nor does God surely deprive any of his grace in such a way as to leave them none remaining except the reprobate.

In other words, not all sins are equal. A man may sin against his wife by failing to take out the garbage as promised, but such a sin does not constitute covenant breaking and does not give her legitimate grounds for divorce. But if he sleeps with another woman, he has broken covenant with his wife and given her a biblical basis for filing divorce. The same kind of distinction is at work in our covenantal relationship with the Lord. There are sins that take place within the boundaries of the covenant, and while damaging the covenant relationship, especially if not confessed and forsaken, they do not constitute apostasy. However, a pattern of willful rejection of the gospel as a way of life calls for church discipline, and if no repentance is forthcoming, excommunication (Mt. 18:15-20). Apostasy is not measured by discreet actions, but the overall slant of one’s life, the direction of one’s walk. God evaluates us according to the videotape of our lives, not a few photographs.

Calvin continues his explanation, noting that those who eventually apostatize did in fact receive God’s blessing. He says we must contrast “the gifts of God, which he has mentioned, and this falling away”:

For he falls away who forsakes the Word of God, who extinguishes its light, who deprives himself of the taste of the heavenly gift, who relinquishes the participation of the Spirit. Now this is wholly to renounce God. We see now 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 . . .

Calvin notes that apostasy can come on gradually by degrees. And this ought to be observed; for when we turn aside from the right way, we not only excuse to other our vices, but we also impose on ourselves. Satan stealthily creeps on us, and by degrees allures us by clandestine arts, so that when we go astray we know not that we are going astray. Thus gradually we slide, until at length we rush headlong into ruin. We observe this daily in many.

That final sentence indicates that Calvin did not view apostasy as a mere hypothetical possibility. Thus, “the Apostle does not without reason forewarn all the

disciples of Christ to beware in time; for a continued torpor commonly ends in lethargy, which is followed by alienation of mind.”

Calvin says the list of blessings in 6:4-5 are “the names by which he signalizes the knowledge of the Gospel.” In other words, these blessings cannot be reduced to common grace or merely external benefits.

He calls it *illumination*; it hence follows that men are blind, until Christ, the light of the world, enlightens them. He calls it *a tasting of the heavenly gift*; intimating that the things which Christ confers on us are above nature and the world, and that they are yet tasted by faith. He calls it *participation* of the Spirit; for He it is who distributes to everyone as He wills all the light and knowledge which he can have; for without him no one can say that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3); he opens for us the eyes of our minds, and reveals to us the secret things of God. He calls it *a tasting of the good word of God*; by which he means, that the will of God is therein revealed, not in any sort of way, but in such a way as sweetly to delight us; in short, by this title is pointed out the difference between the Law and the Gospel . . . And lastly, he calls it *a tasting of the powers of the world to come*; by which he intimates, that we are admitted by faith as it were into the kingdom of heaven, so that we see in spirit that blessed immortality which is hid from our sense.

Let us then know, that the Gospel cannot be otherwise rightly known than by the illumination of the Spirit, and that being thus drawn away from the world, we are raised up to heaven, and that knowing the goodness of God we rely on his word.

Of course, this raises for Calvin the momentous question: “How can it be that he who has once made such a progress should afterwards fall away?” And here Calvin goes on to distinguish what those elected-unto-final-salvation receive from what the covenant-member-who-will-apostatize receives. But note that Calvin’s phrasing of the question indicates that those who eventually apostatize do in fact make progress in the grace of God. Decretally speaking, “The elect are also beyond the danger of finally falling away; for the Father who gave them to be preserved by Christ His Son is greater than all, and Christ promises to watch over them all so that none may perish.” This is exactly right: those God has elected for final salvation will persevere to the end.

However, Calvin also realizes there must be a sense in which covenant members who do finally fall away really experienced the grace of God in a genuine way:

But I cannot admit that all this is any reason why He should not grant the reprobate also some taste of His grace, why He should not irradiate their minds with some sparks of His light, why He should not give them some perception of His goodness, and in some sort engrave His Word on their hearts. Otherwise, where would be the temporary faith mentioned by Mark 4:17? There is therefore some knowledge even in the reprobate, which afterwards vanishes away, either because it did not strike roots sufficiently deep, or because it withers, being choked up.

Again, it's that last phrase that is so important. For Calvin, it is entirely possible for someone to have faith and to experience new life, only to have those things choked out because of subsequent sin and unbelief.⁴⁵

At this point, we should note that Calvin can explain apostasy in two ways: either the new life never *really* took hold, or it did take hold but did not *endure* in the face of trials and temptations. To put it another way, for Calvin, sometimes the difference is located in the quality of the faith, other times in the duration of faith. True faith endures; false faith may resemble true faith in every other way, but it lacks this feature of endurance, and so in the final analysis it must be sharply distinguished from the faith of the elect. Calvin alternates between these explanations of apostasy throughout his commentaries and in the *Institutes*. He does not make it clear if these are two different kinds of apostasy, or if they are perspectively related explanations of apostasy in general. For example, he writes in the *Institutes* (3.2.11-12, Henry Beveridge translation; my emphasis),

I am aware it seems unaccountable to some how faith is attributed to the reprobate, seeing that it is declared by Paul to be one of the fruits of election; and yet the difficulty is easily solved: for though none are enlightened into faith, and truly feel the efficacy of the Gospel, with the exception of those who are fore-ordained to salvation, *yet experience shows that the reprobate are sometimes affected in a way so similar to the elect, that even in their own judgment there is no difference between them.* Hence it is not strange, that *by the Apostle a taste of heavenly gifts, and by Christ himself a temporary faith, is ascribed to them.* Not that they truly perceive the power of spiritual grace and the sure light of faith; but the Lord, the better to convict them, and leave them without excuse, instills into their minds such a sense of his goodness as can be felt without the Spirit of adoption. Should it be objected, that believers have no stronger testimony to assure them of their adoption, I answer, that though *there is a great resemblance and affinity between the elect of God and those who are impressed for a time with a fading faith,* yet the elect alone have that full assurance which is extolled by Paul, and by which they are enabled to cry, Abba, Father . . . *But in this there is nothing to prevent an inferior operation of the Spirit from taking its course in the reprobate . . .* We may add, that the reprobate never have any other than a confused sense of grace, laying hold of the shadow rather than the substance, because the Spirit properly seals the forgiveness of sins in the elect only, applying it by special faith to their use. *Still it is correctly said, that the reprobate believe God to be propitious to them, inasmuch as they accept the gift of reconciliation, though confusedly and without due discernment; not that they are partakers of the same faith or regeneration with the children of God; but because, under a covering of hypocrisy, they seem to have a principle of faith in common with them . . . There is nothing inconsistent in this with the fact of his enlightening some with a present sense of grace, which afterwards proves evanescent . . .*

⁴⁵ Quotations taken from John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint, 1993), trans. by John Owen, 135ff.

I therefore deny that they [the reprobate] either understand his will considered as immutable, or steadily embrace his truth, inasmuch as they rest satisfied with an evanescent impression; just as a tree not planted deep enough may take root, but will *in process of time* wither away, *though it may for several years not only put forth leaves and flowers, but produce fruit*. In short, as by the revolt of the first man, the image of God could be effaced from his mind and soul, *so there is nothing strange in His shedding some rays of grace on the reprobate, and afterwards allowing these to be extinguished*. There is nothing to prevent His giving some a slight knowledge of his Gospel, and imbuing others thoroughly . . . Nor can it be said that the Spirit therefore deceives, because he does not quicken the seed which lies in their hearts so as to make it ever remain incorruptible as in the elect. I go farther: seeing it is evident, from the doctrine of Scripture and from daily experience, that *the reprobate are occasionally impressed with a sense of divine grace, some desire of mutual love must necessarily be excited in their hearts. Thus for a time a pious affection prevailed in Saul, disposing him to love God. Knowing that he was treated with paternal kindness, he was in some degree attracted by it*. But as the reprobate have no rooted conviction of the paternal love of God, so they do not in return yield the love of sons, but are led by a kind of mercenary affection . . . Were it not true that many fall away from *the common faith*, (I call it common, because *there is a great resemblance between temporary and living, enduring faith*,) Christ would not have said to his disciples, “If ye *continue* in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,” (John 8: 31, 32.) *He is addressing those who had embraced his doctrine, and urging them to progress in the faith, lest by their sluggishness they extinguish the light which they have received [by failing to persevere in that light]*.

Note that Calvin compares apostate Christians to the “first man,” Adam, who effaced the image of God from his mind and soul through his fall into sin. Just as Adam was endowed with gracious gifts from God, but squandered them through unbelief, so it is in the case of apostates. The link with Saul is also appropriate, since Saul is a new Adam figure, endowed with a new heart and the gift of the Spirit (1 Sam 9-10). But like the first Adam, he loses these gifts when he violates God’s covenant (1 Sam. 16:14). As I argued in my earlier essay, apostasy is ultimately a mystery, tracing back to the original act of apostasy in the Garden of Eden.

Calvin also says the reprobate covenant member has a kind of faith that is “common” with the elect and experiences “the gift of reconciliation” after a fashion. He draws a deep, qualitative line through what the elect and non-elect covenant members experience, but he also shows at least some measure of appreciation for what I have termed “undifferentiated grace” or “covenantal grace.” While his position stops short of what I have articulated, because he brings in the decretal perspective too quickly, he clearly argues for the possibility of a real apostasy – a real falling from some genuine experience of God’s favor and goodness.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ It would also be helpful at this point to bring in Calvin’s twofold doctrine of election. Calvin distinguished general (or covenantal) election from special (or eternal) election, making the the

Interestingly, F. F. Bruce makes the same kind of move as Calvin in his commentary on Hebrews 6:4-6.⁴⁷ On the one hand Bruce insists that there is a difference between the elect and non-elect covenant member all along. The non-elect covenant member has experienced Christianity in the same way a person immunized against a disease has been inoculated with a milder form of that disease. “And in the spiritual realm experience suggests that it is possible to be ‘immunized’ against Christianity by being inoculated with something which, for the time being, looks so like the real thing that it is generally mistaken for it.” But Bruce also insists that “continuance is the test of reality” when it comes to matters of faith, citing the parable of the sower as evidence that only time and trials can separate out the various types of soil. He admits regarding Hebrews 6:4-6, “From [the author’s] description of the experiences of those who may nevertheless fall away, it would certainly be difficult to distinguish them at the outset from those who are going to stay the course.” Bruce is right that Hebrews 6:4-5 do not allow us to distinguish who is going to persevere and who is going to fall away. These verses describe blessings held in common by both groups.

Neither Calvin nor Bruce give a fully satisfactory doctrine of apostasy, in line with that offered by Emmrich and in my articles, but they very closely approximate what Emmrich and I are getting at. They both admit a great resemblance between the elected-unto-perseverance covenant member, and the covenant-member-who apostatize – indeed the resemblance is so close, the two may be virtually undistinguishable from a covenantal/pastoral/experiential perspective until the reprobate falls away and breaks covenant.

Conclusion: Apostasy, Covenant, and the Gospel

Apostasy is obviously a sad, heart-tearing topic, especially for those who have family members or friends who have apostatized. So why I have now written two major articles on the topic, both focused on the most troubling apostasy text in all of Scripture? I certainly do not relish dealing with the subject. But my desire is for the church’s pastors and teachers to be honest with the Bible, and in light of the Bible, to be honest with those they shepherd and instruct. I do not claim to have written the “final word” on this hard topic, but I do hope it’s a helpful word. I certainly don’t have answers to all the questions posed by the Bible’s teaching on apostasy. But by handling difficult texts like Hebrews 6:4-8 with integrity and openness, and by preaching them with appropriate humility, charity, and reverence, we can know that God will bless his word as a powerful means of grace for keeping his people on the way towards the goal.

The irony is that the understanding of the covenant tied into the view of apostasy laid out here actually frees us from having to worry so much about “falling away”! Given the view of the covenant articulated in this essay, we need no longer ask, “What has God *decreed* about my future?” or “Was I *really* converted back in the

former the context for the latter. We cannot go into a full discussion here, but consult Calvin’s *Institutes* 3.21.5-7.

⁴⁷ See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews, Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 144ff.

eighth grade at summer camp?” Such questions are always unanswerable anyway (Deut. 29:29; Jer. 17:9). Instead of gazing into the heavens or into our navels, we can ask, “What has spoken *to me* in his word? What promises has he made *to me*? What responsibilities has he laid *upon me*? What warnings has he given *to me*?” And covenantal identity and conditionality enable us to answer those questions. This is what it means to “look at election through the lens of the covenant.” This is what means to use the covenant in a pastoral way. When God says he has elected us in Christ (Eph. 1:4), redeemed us in Christ (1 Pt. 1:2), united us to Christ (Rom. 6:1-14), poured out his Spirit on us to dwell within us (Rom. 8:1-11), made us his temple (1 Pt. 2:1-9), and so forth, we should not respond with doubts (“Is this *really* about me?”) or speculations (“If it’s true of me today, will it *still* be so tomorrow?”). Instead, we should take God at his word and structure our lives accordingly. *But if we’re going to take the promises at face value, we must take the warnings at face value as well.* Our fear of doing the latter has all too often kept us from doing the former. And that’s why I’ve addressed this issue. I hope my work serves the church well.