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A CRITICAL-EXEGETICAL STUDY
OF HEBREWS 6:4-8

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of New Testament Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

by

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CHAPTER I

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Purpose and Procedure

The purpose of this paper is an investigation of Hebrews 6:4-8, especially in the light of the problem posed by the text, the impossibility of a second repentance.

The method followed will be a word for word examination of the text, preceded by a brief presentation of the text in the context of the entire letter. The last two chapters show the text in its relevant Scriptural and historical contexts.

The Text in the General Setting of the Whole Epistle

Any effort to determine the relationship of our text to the entire epistle must necessarily consider both the occasion and the purpose of the letter. There is one outstanding theme, the finality and perfection of the Christian religion.¹ "Perfection" is perhaps the key word of the whole epistle, the perfection of communion with God, the perfection of redemption to God, gained by the perfect High

¹B. F. Westcott, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), p. xlix.

Priest (chapters 7-10).² Christianity is the best, the greatest, the last revelation of the Deus Absconditus by which He has become the Deus Revelatus. He who would see God must behold Him in His Son Jesus. He who would hear God's final Word must hear it "in His Son". Not to listen is to die. Yes, to grow cold in attention to that Word is dangerous, and, if such a habit is not corrected, it can become fatal to that faith which alone maintains men in the right covenant relationship with God. Letting go of Christ is letting go of God.

It is just this apostasy which seems to have threatened the Hebrew Christians. That is shown by the repeated warnings against unbelief, indifference, coldness, laxity in faith and faithfulness, which fall like hammer blows again and again throughout the entire letter.

The readers of the epistle are evidently in danger of giving up their Christian faith, which some of them have held for a long time. Indeed, there are already about them lapsed persons, who have thus fallen away (6:6), who cannot be renewed again unto repentance. The writer is persuaded better things of his readers. For the apostates, however, he reserves his most terrible indictment. There remains for them only a certain fearful expectation of judgment (10:27), for they have trodden under foot the Son of God, and done despite to the Spirit of grace (10:29). The terrible denunciation of these persons in chapters 6 and 10 makes it clear that this is no imaginary class, but a real and

²James Moffatt, "A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews," The International Critical Commentary, edited by Augustus Briggs, Samuel Driver, and Alfred Plummer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), XXXIX, xxxi.

present element of the immediate situation, the existence and possible growth of which the writer counts a most serious peril to the church. The writer would hardly present to them with such vividness, and twice in the epistle, the awful consequences of apostasy, unless there were danger that some of them should fall into the same deadly sin.

The peril of apostasy under the stress of persecution . . . indifference as to Christian faith A sense of disappointment at the failure of the promises to reach fulfillment . . . the wearing out of their first enthusiasm For these and other reasons, sluggishness and indifference were creeping into the church, and a strong declaration of the folly and the peril of such decline was urgently demanded.

The purpose of Hebrews was thus above all things a practical purpose. The cold and indifferent among those to whom this Christian leader writes, must be shamed out of their torpor and neglect, and roused to a new consciousness of the transcendent worth of that which they still possessed, but were likely to lose. This, and not their theological instruction, or adjustment to the downfall of Judaism, is the idea which dominates every part of the letter, and it is this that explains the fact that admonition and practical exhortation are so constantly interwoven with teaching in the epistle. Hebrews is thus to be understood not as a treatise upon the relation of Christianity to Judaism, . . . but as an impassioned oration, wholly centered upon recalling to steadfast devotion to Christ weary and wavering disciples.³

Viewed in such a light, the passage under study and chapter 10:26-31 become the two most explosive warnings against the peril of apostasy and its fatal fruit of death beyond recall. It is by portraying such a possible fall in all its ghastly colors that the writer hopes to blast the listless Hebrew Christians from their dull sloth, and to inspire them

³Edgar J. Goodspeed, The Epistle to the Hebrews (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1908), pp. 17 ff.

to press forward away from the black pit of unbelief. The whole letter has this for its purpose, while these two passages are its strongest admonitions. It is as though the writer were saying: "You have the life of God through Christ in your hands. But it seems as if you are willing to give it up. If you do, behold your fate (6:4-8; 10:26-31). It cannot be, it will not happen. Forward you must go, looking unto Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith (12:1 f)."

The Text in Its Immediate Context

From chapter 4:14 through chapter 7, the writer develops the theme: "Jesus the Great High Priest, His Person and Superiority".⁴ It would seem then that 5:11-6:20 is an extended exhortation to faith in and faithfulness to Jesus, the High Priest, and to the final revelation which God has made known in Him. We might consider our text as the climactic warning of this larger exhortatory section. From 4:14-5:7, the writer takes great pains to bring out the surpassing greatness of Jesus, as the perfect High Priest between God and men. He would like to develop the thought to an even greater degree, but he feels that it is impossible because of the dullness and the spiritual immaturity of his readers (5:11-14). As Farrar points out:

He is about to give them not the milk which was necessary for infants--for beginners in Christ's teaching--

⁴Moffatt, op. cit., p. xxiv.

but solid food, such as was only fitted for mature understandings. In their present condition--long as was the time since their conversion--they were incapable of receiving it;⁵

This lack of faith requires immediate remedial action.

So it is, that in a manner characteristic of the whole epistle, the writer ceases to teach and begins to warn and encourage.

He bids them, therefore, dismiss for the present the subjects which had engaged their attention when they were catechumens (6:1-3). In those days they had been occupied with the initial steps of religious knowledge. It was not his present purpose--it ought to be quite unnecessary now--to remind them once more of such rudimentary truths as the difference between faith and works; the distinction between Jewish ablutions and Christian Baptism; the meaning of imposition of hands; the truths of the resurrection of the body and the sentence of the world to come. They could not indeed need such teachings as this--unless they were in danger of apostasy. Of this peril he gives them a most solemn warning.⁶

Not only does the writer make it known that he will not "lay another foundation" of the beginnings of faith, he also states that such an act is impossible, if immaturity leads to apostasy.

The implication is that his readers are in danger of this sin, as indeed he has hinted already (in 3:7-4:14), and that one of the things that is weakening them is their religious inability to realize the supreme significance of Jesus. To remain as they are is fatal; it means the possibility of a relapse altogether. 'Come on,' the writer bids them, 'for if you do not you will fall back, and to fall back is to be ruined.' The connexion between this passage and the foregoing, therefore, is that to rest

⁵F. W. Farrar, The Early Days of Christianity (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., m. d.), I, 381 f.

⁶Ibid.

content with their present elementary hold upon Christian truth is to have an inadequate grasp of it; the force of temptation is so strong that this rudimentary acquaintance with it will not prevent them from falling away all together, and the one thing to ensure their religious position is to see the full meaning of what Jesus is and does.⁷

The verses immediately following the passage under consideration present a decided contrast to the stern warning of verses 4-8.

At this point the teacher of the Hebrew Church suddenly and decidedly changes his tone. He will not let his last word be one of complaint and despondency. He refuses to believe that the apostates' doom is in store for any of those to whom he writes. Therefore he hastens to assure them that he cherishes hopeful thoughts of their present and future state, calling them, in this solitary instance, 'beloved,' as if to make amends for the severity of his rebuke, and declaring that he fully expects to see realized in their experience the better alternative of the foregoing contrast--fruitfulness connected with, leading up to, salvation--instead of the cursing and perdition appointed for the land that bears only thorns and thistles.

So the teacher's complaining gives way to the charity that believeth all things and hopeth all things.⁸

Though the writer to the Hebrews has his strong fears as to the safety of his readers' faith, yet he is always the optimist, the tactful teacher, who knows how to point out glaring weaknesses, and how also to inspire for correction without arousing undue antagonism. Hence, the positive statement of verses 9-12! As far as he is concerned, his Christian readers

⁷Moffatt, op. cit., p. 77.

⁸A. B. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), p. 218.

will fare better.

He did not doubt that they were heirs of salvation. Their work, their alms, and all their good endeavors furnished proof of this; They had ministered to the saints; they were still doing so, though, perhaps--as he seems to hint with delicate kindness--with less zeal than before. He exhorts them not to show themselves remiss, but willingly to work out their salvation to the end, and so by faith and endurance to enter into that heritage which was pledged to them not only by the word but by the oath of God.⁹

In verses 13-19, the writer uses the example of the certainty of God's promise to Abraham in order to fortify the endurance of his readers under adversity--a patience for which he has just pleaded in verse 12.

However severe, therefore, their afflictions had been, they might rest upon a sure hope. The little boat of their lives was being tossed by many a storm, yet it was safe, for it was moored by an anchor which could never slip its hold. That anchor was not fixed even on the rock of an earthly sea, but the hawser which held it passed out of sight behind the veil of heaven; and in that heavenly sanctuary One had entered as a forerunner on their behalf. He would see that the anchor held; He would keep guard over the promised hope,--the High Priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.¹⁰

Any interpretation of the text before us must take cognizance of several important points. The writer does not accuse the Hebrew Christians of the apostasy which he here depicts. His words are intended solely as a solemn warning against this very fall which he describes.¹¹ It is by such a warning that

⁹Farrar, op. cit., p. 391.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Hermann Strathmann, "Der Brief an die Hebraeer," Das Neue Testament Deutsch, edited by Paul Althaus and Johannes Behm (Goettingen: Bandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1949), IX, 100.

he hopes to strengthen his readers' drooping hands and weary knees. The burden of his message might be summarized as follows: (We have taken the liberty of putting these words into the mouth of the writer.)

"My dear Hebrew Christians!" I write these things to steer you away from the dreadful fate which I here describe. For you could and will become guilty of such apostasy if you do not remain faithful to the great Shepherd and Bishop of your souls, who, through the blood of the eternal covenant, has procured an everlastingly valid approach to God for you (13:20). Faithful you must remain, even in the face of the blood and sweat and toil and tears of persecution. For consider Christ, consider Moses, consider all the other heroes of faith who persisted, who ran with their eyes on the goal of the eternal world and won. Let these be your examples for courage and godly endurance. For remember, God will not speak to us again. His final Word He spoke through the Son (1:1-2). This is His final revelation of His decisively permanent, perfect covenant of peace and forgiveness. You must accept it and live, or reject it and die, take it into your heart and cling to it though fire licks at your feet, and lions charge your defenseless body. For if you do not, if you feel that there is yet something to be done to appease the Lord or that your faith is not worth the suffering incurred, if you regard Christ as just another in the long line of Hebrew prophets and not the Prophet and the Priest of God, then there is but one fate in store

for you--that which is pictured in the following words."

A second point to be noted is this:

Bible writers often state in unqualified terms as an absolute truth what is in reality only an affair of tendency. Translated into a statement of tendency, the doctrine taught is this. Every fall involves a risk of apostasy, and the higher the experience fallen from the greater the risk The nearer the initial stage to a thorough conversion the less likely is the second change, if the first turned out abortive; and so on, in ever-increasing degrees of improbability as lapses increase in number. The brighter the light of the soul, the deeper the darkness when the light is put out. The sweeter the manna of God's Word to the taste, the more loathsome it becomes when it has lost its relish. The fiercer the fire in the hearth while the fuel lasts, the more certain it is that when the fire goes out there will remain nothing but ashes. The livelier the hope of glory, the greater the aversion of all thoughts of the world to come when once a Christian has, like Atheist in the Pilgrim's Progress, turned his back on the heavenly Jerusalem.¹²

We shall conclude our introductory remarks with this statement from Bruce:

The description of the original Christian experience is a companion picture to the preceding account of the initial Christian instruction. It points to an intense religious life full of enthusiasm, joy, and spiritual elevation, not, however to be regarded as the exceptional privilege of the few, but rather as the common inheritance of the church in the apostolic age. The picture is painted in high colors, but the outline is not very distinct; and the spectator, while powerfully impressed, fails to carry away a clear idea of the scene. The writer's purpose is not to give information, but to awaken in the breasts of his first readers sacred memories, and and breed godly sorrow over a dead past. Hence, he expresses himself in emotional terms such as might be used by recent converts rather than in the colder but more

¹²Bruce, op. cit., pp. 213-4.

exact style of the historian.¹³

Bearing in mind these observations, we shall now turn our attention to the text itself.

¹³Op. cit., p. 208.

"Yes!" An explanatory conjunction.

In explanation of the appreciation suggested in the last words (if not parallel) or, as others said, of the writer's intention to neglect mere foundation matters, since beyond the fact that it would be indifferent to a new presentation of the...
 "Impossible!" The subject of the...
 The same word with the same strong emphasis is used by our Lord in Matt. 19:26 and in Mark 10:27. Standing at the beginning of the sentence, the word is especially impressive. The writer desires to have his readers realize the utter impossibility of the which he is about to say. This is the key word of the entire passage. This is the word that creates the problem of interpretation. If its meaning could be honestly taken down to "difficult", or "almost impossible", the problem would, to a great extent, disappear. But as Michel, *Levens Christenheit*, points out, "Christenheit" is not a matter of mere words, but of the...
 "Impossible!" The meaning, "impossible",

Edgar A. Bonebrake, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1907), p. 59.

Michel, *Levens Christenheit*, p. 111. *Christenheit* is a German word for the English "Christianity", which is a translation of the Greek *Christianos*. (Vanderpool and Stewart, 1907), p. 111.

CHAPTER III

AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF THE TEXT

Verses 4-6

"For!" An explanatory conjunction!

In explanation of the apprehension suggested in the last words (If God permit.); or, as others hold, of the writer's intention to neglect mere foundation matters, since anyone who had given them up would be indifferent to a new presentation of them.¹

ἀδύνατον "Impossible!" The subject of ἀνακαλιψέειν in verse 6! The same word with the same strong emphasis is used by our Lord in Matt. 19:26 and in Mark 10:27. Standing at the beginning of the sentence, the word is singularly impressive. The writer desires to have his readers realize the utter impossibility of that which he is about to say. This is the key word of the entire passage. This is the word that creates the problem of interpretation. If its meaning could be honestly toned down to "difficult", or "almost impossible", the problem would, to a great extent, disappear. But as Michel, quoting Chrysostom, points out: "ἀδύνατον ist staerker als etwa οὐδέποτε, οὐδὲ σμυθέσει, oder οὐκ ἐξέσται (Chrysost.)."² The meaning, "impossible",

¹ Edgar J. Goodspeed, The Epistle to the Hebrews (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1908), p. 59.

² Otto Michel, "Der Brief an die Hebraeer," Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar ueber das Neue Testament, edited by Heinrich Meyer (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1949), XII, 147.

must stand.

Is this a limited or an unlimited impossibility?

Does the writer exclude even the power of God to restore repentance in the hearts of those whom he is about to describe? If so, then we are forced to agree with Davidson:

Impossible must not be toned down to . . . 'impossible for man;' for though it be true that by saying 'impossible to renew' (active voice), the Apostle has in mind the work of himself or any other Christian teacher, yet such means is God's appointed means, and so far is he from contemplating any agency of interference higher than man's, that he rather implies that to the higher agency the impossibility is due (vv. 7-8).³

It would seem, however, that the witness of Matt. 19:26, Mark 10:27, Gen. 18:14, and Job 42:2 overthrows this theory. For in these passages the Lord makes it unmistakably clear that His divine power knows no bounds. And certainly, that same unbounded power could be applied in the case of these apostate Christians. We go along, therefore, with Farrar:

All that the author has in mind is the agency of men--the teaching and ministry of the Church; he is neither speaking nor thinking of the omnipotence of God.⁴

^{ci}
~~α τ τ α ε~~ "Once!" Perhaps more properly in this context, "once for all!" According to Thayer, "Like the Latin semel. It is an adverb which marks completeness of action, is

³A. B. Davidson, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1950), p. 122.

⁴F. W. Farrar, The Early Days of Christianity (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., n.d.), I, 385.

used of what is so done as to be of perpetual validity and never need repetition"!⁵ Also Westcott:

The addition of *ἅπασι* (once for all) marks the completeness and sufficiency of the single act. The word is characteristic of the Epistle; 9:7; 9:26 ff; 10:2; 12:26 f. Compare I Pet. 3:18; Jude 3:5; and ephapax c. 7:27.⁶

The word, in a remote way, modifies the next three participles.

τοὺς φωτισθέντας "Those who have been enlightened!"

Grammatically, this and the next three participles are the object of *ἀνακρίσειν* in verse 6. "The object is placed before the verb in order to fix attention upon the variety and greatness of the gifts which have been received and thrown away."⁷ Though the two lexicons consulted are unanimous in

ascribing the general meaning of "enlightened" to *φωτισθέντας*, its exact interpretation in our text is rather difficult.⁸

Does the word, as it is used here, refer to the fact of Christian conversion or to the event of Christian baptism? Westcott supports the former view: "The illumination both here and in chapter 10:32 is referred to the decisive moment when the light was apprehended in its glory."⁹ Compare also John 1:9.

⁵J. H. Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: American Book Co., 1889), p. 54.

⁶B. F. Westcott, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), p. 148.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Walter Bauer, Griechisch-Deutsches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament (3rd. ed.; Berlin: Verlag Alfred Toepelmann, 1937), p. 1446. Thayer, op. cit., p. 663.

⁹Op. cit., p. 148.

The writer would have in mind, then, that moment when the Hebrew Christians were first brought to the Light of the World and "beheld the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ". Keil speaks thus on the meaning of the word:

Die Erleuchtung geschieht mittelst Belehrung ueber die Heilswahrheiten und besteht in der ἐπιγνώσις τῆς ἀληθείας (10:26), in der Aufhellung des νοῦς durch das Licht des Evangeliums, wodurch der Mensch aus der Finsternis der durch die Suende erzeugten Entfremdung Gott zur klaren Einsicht ueber sein Verhaeltnis zu Gott versetzt wird (Eph. 5:14).¹⁰

The word is frequently employed in both the Old and the New Testaments (Is. 60:1; Is. 60:19; Micah 7:8; I Cor. 4:5; Eph. 1:18; Eph. 3:9; II Tim. 1:10), and throughout, it apparently designates that act of God by which he lightens men with the Christian revelation.

Such illumination throws light on all that a man is in himself and in his actions, and on his relation to all things and especially toward God. Hence, the mind's action under it will be repentance and faith.¹¹

To be enlightened by God is to be known by God, to experience personally both aspects of God's Kingdom in action upon the heart--the aspect of divine judgment against one's sin, and the aspect of redemptive grace which removes that sin and restores one into the right relationship with the Lord. One who is enlightened by God is found by God and made God's own. Yes, not only is he found in the manner in which an unconscious stone is picked up by a wandering boy; man found by

¹⁰ Carl Friedrich Keil, Commentar ueber den Brief an die Hebraeer (Leipzig: Doerffler und Franke, 1885), p. 154.

¹¹ Davidson, op. cit., p. 121.

God is joyously aware of the fact, he is happily enlightened of his salvation.

He who is enlightened is enlivened. Compare John 1:4; Psalm 36:9. In the latter passage, "light" and "life" are parallel. An enlightened man has been made to see the deception and death of the kosmos and the sarx, of which he is naturally a helpless victim; and, instead, he now is swept up by the aleetheia of God, that which is genuine, real, eternal, in opposition to the "lie" which governs the devil-domain of sin. A man "enlightened" is a man whose eyes God has opened, so that he has possession of the life, which, though unseen, is imperishable, the life that is substance, and not shadow, the life that is "hid with Christ in God", yet is firmly held with the hand of courageous faith. All this is packed into the word *πρωτολόγος*, and it is our personal opinion that this is its meaning in our text.

Another view contends that the word definitely refers to the fact of Christian baptism. "Die altkirchliche Auslegung bezieht *πρωτολόγος* (die Erleuchtung 6:4; 10:32) seit Justin auf die Taufe."¹² "Speaking of baptism, Justin Martyr says (Apol. 1:61.65), 'The name of this lustral bath is enlightenment, the idea being, that those who receive this teaching are enlightened in their understanding.'¹³ We see then that

¹² Michel, op. cit., p. 147.

¹³ J. N. D. Kelley, Early Christian Creeds (London: Longman Green and Co., 1950), p. 43.

"the word acquired at a very early age the technical sense of 'baptized', so that 'enlightenment' (photismos) was a recognized synonym of baptism, though it referred directly not to the outward sign, but to the thing signified."¹⁴

It is understandable that the early Fathers should place this particular emphasis upon φωτισμός. For, as Westcott points out, "This crisis of illumination was marked inwardly by a reception of the knowledge of the truth (c. 10:26); and outwardly by the admission to Christian fellowship."¹⁵ And it is the Sacrament of Baptism which brings both these gifts to the one baptized. Though it is certainly possible that the writer of our epistle had in mind the act of baptism, we personally feel that such was not the case. We submit the following reasons.

In the first place, such an interpretation of the word is rather foreign to its general Scriptural usage. The Septuagint employs φωτίζω in the sense of "teaching", or "giving instruction" (Cf. Judg. 13:8; II Kings 12:2.). And in the New Testament, the baptismal view lacks definite confirmation. Keil maintains: "Dieser Sprachgebrauch (to translate φωτίζω for "baptize") ist dem Neuen Testament fremd."¹⁶

¹⁴Farrar, op. cit., p. 382. For further references on the Patristic understanding of the word, the reader is directed to Westcott, op. cit., p. 148; Michel, op. cit., p. 147.

¹⁵Westcott, op. cit., p. 148.

¹⁶Op. cit., p. 154.

The rendering "those who have been baptized" for *ἡμετέρας* is questionable also for this reason. "The use of 'enlightenment' for 'baptism' did not exist before this passage was written, but is derived from it" ¹⁷ Taking this statement at face value, we have legitimate reason to question the Patristic stand for baptism.

To equate *ἡμετέρας* with "those who have been baptized" had its dangerous results for the post-Apostolic Church. For . . . sterner schismatics . . . deduced from this passage the duty of finally excluding the weak from Church communion by refusing absolution to those who once lapsed into apostasy or flagrant sin. This was equivalent to the assertion that all sin willingly committed after baptism is unpardonable¹⁸

From this passage (Heb. 6:4-8) these Fathers "deduced the unlawfulness of administering a second time the rite of Baptism, a right conclusion indeed, but one which rests on other grounds than those which this passage affords."¹⁹ Both Montanists and Novatians seized upon the passage under consideration to justify their position of a demand for excommunication upon those who fell into a grievous post-baptismal sin. That they were wrong in so doing, is undeniably apparent when one realizes that such exclusion is "diametrically op-

¹⁷ Farrar, op. cit., p. 383.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

posed to the practice and teaching of Christ and His Apostles."²⁰

Michel introduces a rather interesting interpretation for *φωτισθέντας* and the three participles which follow, when he advances the theory that this fourfold description of the Christian experience constitutes a liturgical-sacramental phrase borrowed from the worship service of the early Church.²¹ He cites Eph. 5:14 as the source from which he draws this inference.²² Certainly such an interpretation sounds quite reasonable and could well fit within the framework of the knowledge which we possess of the worship life in the New Testament Church.

The use of the aorist here, as also in the following three participles, is significant. We like to regard it as being punctiliar, thereby depicting events and realities in the life of a Christian that should happen with a certain definite finality. Also note the passive voice. This "enlightenment", whether it be the act of conversion or the rite of baptism, is an act of God upon the individual. (Cf. Ps. 36:9. It is God's light that shines. Man is enlightened.) There is no self-achievement here, no finding of knowledge by human power or pursuit. ⁴ He who is

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Michel, op. cit., p. 147.

²²Ibid.

"enlightened" is found by Knowledge, the knowledge of salvation, which He, who is the Truth, implants into the hearts of those whom His Father has chosen to illumine (Matt. 11:27).

γευσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου "And have tasted of the heavenly gift!" According to Behm, *γεύομαι* means:

1. eigtl. kosten, schmecken zB Plat. Resp VIII 559 d; Hi 12,11; 34,3 (fuer *ἄγ*, wie durchweg in LXX)
 2. uebertr: fuehlen, bekommen, innwerden, durch eigne Erfahrung kennenlernen, Schoenes und Gutes sowohl wie Widriges u. Schweres Im Neuen T. bedeutet *γεύομαι* 1. eigtl: kosten Mt. 27:34; J. 2:9, geniessen, essen Ag. 10:10; 20:11; Lk. 14:24.²³

It would seem that the secondary meaning, "personally to experience", is appropriate to our text in both verses 4 and 6, and also in 2:9. To "taste the gift from heaven" is to possess it and to experience it in the fulness of its reality. This is no casual brushing up against the "heavenly gift". This is a personal and intimate absorption of its potent power. This is indeed a keenly conscious tasting of the sweetness of the Lord's grace (I Pet. 2:3). This is the actual partaking of the King's great supper feast (Luke 14:24). This is a knowing of the Christian revelation that involves the total man. There is no superficial acquaintance with Truth here. We have to do with "die Realitaet der persoenlichen Heilserfahrungen, die die Christen bei ihrer

²³Johannes Behm, in Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Verlag Von W. Kohlhammer, 1949), I, 674 ff.

Bekehrung gemacht haben."²⁴ The use of *γεγονοτι* implies a profoundly personal experience that has taken place in the lives of the Hebrew Christians.

τε "And!" With what words shall we connect it?

According to Westcott:

The correlation of the four participles is by no means clear. The τε may be used in three different connective ways. 1) To introduce a new, and distinct clause closely connected with *φωτισθέντας*, and in a sense subordinate to it (who were once enlightened and so tasted and were made); 2) Or it may be taken in connection with the *καὶ . . . καὶ . . .* which follow so that the three clauses are coordinate with *φωτισθέντας* and explanatory to it. (who were once enlightened having both tasted . . . and been made partakers . . . and tasted . . .); 3) It may be taken with the *καὶ* that follows immediately so that *γεγονοτι τε . . . καὶ μετόχους . . . γενηθέντας* form a twofold explanation of *φωτισθέντας* while *καὶ γονοτι γεγονοτι* is an independent clause (who were once enlightened--having both tasted . . . and been made partakers . . .--and who tasted . . .) Cf. Acts 2:40; Acts 21:30; Acts 22:7; c. 9:19; Luke 26:11; Acts 2:10; Acts 1:8; 13:1; I Cor. 1:30.

The choice between the three constructions will be decided by individual feeling as to the symmetry of expression and thought. On the whole the third arrangement seems to bring out most distinctly two fundamental aspects of the reception of Christian faith, illumination in respect to the divine action, and experience in respect to the human appropriation. The Christian is illuminated by the conscious sense of the gift of life, and by the participation in the Spirit; and he gains an individual sense of the beauty (the intellectual grandeur) of revelation and the powers of the new Order.²⁵

Personally, we feel that the general meaning of the text is not radically altered if one adopts any of the three possible interpretations which Westcott places upon the connective

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Op. cit., p. 147.

particles. The writer is painting the story of the deeply personalized experiences which accompany the wholehearted acceptance of God's redemptive revelation in Christ. And it is certain that in so doing, he is dealing in concepts which are by no means perfectly clear and easily intelligible. Since that is the case (that the exact meaning of the words themselves is rather misty) how can one become dogmatic in his interpretation of the connectives which join these words to one another? We confess with Michel: "Allerdings ist ihr Verhaeltnis untereinander nicht ganz klar."²⁶

τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου "The heavenly gift!" If one concedes that "tasting the heavenly gift" is a paranthetical expression which partially describes Christian enlightenment, then the force of the article before *δωρεᾶς* could perhaps be demonstrative--taste this heavenly gift, referring back to the "enlightenment" which brings with it this gift of eternal life.

"The heavenly gift!" What does it signify?

Das Wort scheint gegenueber *δωρον* staerker juristisch zu sein die formelle Schenkung zu bezeichnen.

In der Ag ist der Geist als *δωρεᾶ* Gottes bezeichnet 2,38; 8,20; 10,45; 11,17 Auch Hb. 6,4. In *δωρεᾶ* liegt im N. T. immer die Gnade Gottes . . . Es findet sich . . . im N. T. immer von der Gabe, die Gott bzw Christus den Menschen gibt.²⁷

If we analyse the word *δωρεᾶ* in the context of the

²⁶Op. cit., p. 149.

²⁷Buechsel, in Kittel, op. cit., II, 169.

epistle (5:1; 8:3; 9:9), we discover that it is used to describe the sacrificial gift which the priests of the Lord offered to atone for their own sins and for the sins of the people. Compare especially chapter 5:1. Also in chapter 11:4, the word *δῶρον* seems to be parallel with the word *ἱερόσπονδον*, again indicating the close relationship between *δωρεά* or *δῶρον* and *ἱερόσπονδον* that existed in the mind of the author of the epistle. It is possible that for this reason Bauer proposes the interpretation "Opfergabe" for *δωρεά* in 6:4.²⁸ He then proceeds to ask the following question: "Could this gift here mean the sacrificial offering of Jesus, the great High Priest?"²⁹ Certainly, that inference is justified, when one stops to reflect upon the centrality of the doctrine of Jesus, the perfect High Priest, as it is so unmistakably developed in the pages of the epistle.

If one is inclined to move in the thought world of John, then *δωρεά* has definite overtones of the Johannine concept of Life, or it could refer to Christ Himself who is both the Bringer of Life and that Life itself (John 3:16; 4:10; 6:32 f; I Pet. 2:3). Both Michel and Westcott suggest this as a possible interpretation.³⁰ To "taste the heavenly gift" would then mean joyously and consciously to possess the reconciliation

²⁸Op. cit., p. 348.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Michel, op. cit., p. 148. Westcott, op. cit., p. 148.

with God, gained by Christ and given in Christ, a reconciliation which is life that never ends, because it is derived from Him whom to know is Life eternal.

As was pointed out previously, the "heavenly gift" can also signify the Holy Ghost.³¹ Such an emphasis upon the word is entirely in keeping with its usage in the book of Acts (2:23; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17). And the whole New Testament on more than one occasion asserts that it is the Spirit who gives Life. Syllogistically speaking, we could say: "Apart from Christ, there is no eternal Life. Apart from the Spirit, no one can confess Jesus as Lord. Therefore, apart from the Spirit, there is no Life. That makes the gift of heavenly Life and the Spirit inseparable. The gift is Life, the Giver is the Spirit."

Some commentators propose "the forgiveness of sins" as a possible meaning for the word. "*ἡ ἄφεσις* is no doubt the forgiveness of sins which is the greatest gift of the new covenant (8:12; 10:17; with Jer. 31:34)."³² This interpretation too is justified, when we remember that there is no Life without forgiveness, no forgiveness without Life. The one necessarily includes the other. And as Davidson rightly points out, it is the perfect remission of guilt, through the blood sacrifice of the High Priest-Son, that has gained for the

³¹Supra: p. 21.

³²Davidson, op. cit., p. 121. See also Goodspeed, op. cit., p. 60.

Hebrew Christians that unhindered fellowship with God which is Life eternal. This is the precious gift of the new covenant.

Personally we are inclined to follow the view of Riggensbach. He claims that the "heavenly gift" has reference to the whole gift of salvation given men in Christ, and does not underscore any one particular aspect of that deliverance.³³ He cites Rom. 5:15 and II Cor. 9:15 as evidence for his position. Perhaps, then, we would be safe in saying that the gift from heaven is the gracious establishment of God's fellowship with sinners, with all its resultant blessings, brought about through the redemptive work of Christ. The term, "heavenly gift", might well be a summary of all that the good God sends down upon His ruined creation to accomplish its re-creation. The gift from above is God Himself in Christ dipping down to dead men, forgiving their guilt, restoring to them His very Life by the indwelling of His Spirit. The "heavenly gift" is redemptive revelation in action, advancing the rule of God's *Βασίλειά* upon hearts formerly controlled by the Prince of Darkness. It is the arm of God's strong deliverance laid bare. It is the cup of salvation poured out upon unsaved men.

Though it is impossible to describe with exact certainty the meaning of *δωρεά*, this one thing is sure. It is a gift given freely, unconditionally by God to men (Rom. 5:15;

³³Eduard Riggensbach, "Brief an die Hebraeer," Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, edited by Theodore Zahn (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Nachf., 1910), XIV, 154.

II Cor. 9:15). There is no debt of obligation on the part of the divine Giver, not even a gift exchange. God, who should destroy, gives all to men who receive everything, but deserve nothing.

This gift of God is characterized as being τῆς ἐπουρανίου. According to Bauer, the word has two basic ideas: 1) That which is found in heaven or is realized or takes place in heaven; 2) Things that possess characteristics of heaven, heavenly things. The latter is the emphasis Bauer places on the word in our text. He contrasts ἐπουράνιος to ἐπίγεια in John 3:12. Thus, "heavenly" describes that which is of the Spirit, in contra-distinction to that which is of the flesh.³⁴

If we look at the word in the context of the epistle (3:1; 8:5; 9:23), we discover that the author employs the word to portray realities that belong to the eternal world, in contrast to that world which is subject to the corruption of time and the decay of death. It is a word that sets forth the things that are of God, and therefore imperishable. It is a word which describes objects bathed in the light of the ἔσχατον, objects which are not a part of this transitory "Diesseits" but belong to the "Jenseits" that never ends. Therefore that which is ἐπουράνιος is also ἀληθινός. It is genuine; it stands; it endures. It is reality in its fullest sense. He who "tastes the heavenly gift" has become

³⁴Op. cit., pp. 508-9.

a δεύτερος ἀνθρώπος ἐξ οὐρανοῦ (I Cor. 15:48),
 a man γεννηθεὶς ἄνωθεν and therefore γεννημένος ἐκ
 τοῦ πνεύματος (John 3:3-6).

As far as we are concerned, this gift of total deliverance from the death of the κόσμος and the σάβη has originated with God in heaven, has come down from heaven and liberated an enslaved creation, and will find its ultimate and full realization again only in heaven.³⁵

We feel with Westcott, that the genitive is a partitive genitive. For although the verb γεύομαι expresses a

. . . real and a conscious enjoyment of the blessing apprehended in its true character (Compare John 6:56 ff-- τρώγειν), yet, at the same time, the enjoyment here described is only partial and inchoative. To feast, to live upon the fulness of the divine blessing belongs to another order. Compare Matt. 16:28; John 8:52; Heb. 2:9; I Pet. 2:3.³⁶

In this connection we might also mention that the Christian enlightenment is also just begun, an experience that is always "im Werden, nicht im Worden". For revelation must, of necessity, be revelation in concealment.

Revelation possesses the same character as Incarnation. The flesh, the humanity of Jesus Christ revealed the Son of God, but it also concealed the Son of God: it revealed Him to the eyes of faith, but concealed from eyes that had no faith. Revelation is always a mystery.³⁷

³⁵For additional material on the word, see Traub in Kittel, op. cit., V, 540-1; Rigggenbach, op. cit., p. 65; Michel, op. cit., p. 148.

³⁶Michel, op. cit., p. 149.

³⁷F. C. Synge, Philippians and Colossians (London: SCM Press, 1951), p. 79.

Since this is true, the full comprehension, the complete enjoyment of this revelation which has enlightened men must await that moment when men "shall know, even as they are known" (I Cor. 13:12).

καὶ μετόχους γεννηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου"And have been made partakers of the Holy Ghost!" The word *μέτοχος* is not very common in the New Testament, being found only in Luke 5:7 and in the Epistle to the Hebrews (1:9; 3:14; 12:8). In the Luke passage it seems to be used substantively for "partner" or "comrade". That is its meaning throughout the Septuagint. It is a word of dignity, a philosophical word, and that fact probably accounts for its frequent appearance in Hebrews. "*μέτοχος* kann sich im Hb. nur mit einer besonderen Wuerde, mit einer wichtigen Gabe verbinden."³⁸ The emphasis placed upon the word in the letter seems to be this. He who is a *μέτοχος* of the "heavenly calling" (3:1), or of "Christ" (3:14), is a man who has been given to experience a deeply personal hold on God. He is a man who feasts his soul on Christ, the Bread of Life (John 6:35), and upon the Spirit of Christ who Himself made such a feast possible.³⁹

By picturing these apostate Christians as persons who "were made sharers of the Spirit of God", the author points to the fact that these people were by no means skin believers.

³⁸Michel, op. cit., p. 148.

³⁹Cf. Hanse in Kittel, op. cit., II, 831 f.

Theirs was a faith with deep roots and genuine sincerity. For they were

. . . partakers of God's Spirit through which a personal certainty of divine grace (10:29) and the possession of the divine life are imparted. This is the highest possible fact or gift or happening which a believer, during his earthly life, is able to receive.⁴⁰

Westcott has a rather interesting note on the word:

The compound expression (*μετόχους γεννηθέντας*) as distinguished from *μετασχομένους* (c. 2:14), marks more than a simple fact of participation (c. 8:13; I Cor. 10:17). It brings out the fact of a personal character gained: and that gained in a vital development. Compare 12:8; 3:14; 10:33; 11:6-7.⁴¹

Thus Westcott too brings out this fact of a personal and conscious experience of participation which is present in the word. People who are sharers of the Holy Ghost are in vital union with God Himself, a union which affects their whole being and gradually re-creates their entire life into the very image of that Spirit to whom they are joined. We might say therefore that this participation of the Spirit is just another way of expressing both the initial invasion of the Spirit into human hearts and His constant activity, designed to consecrate those hearts completely to the will of God.

What is the possible connection between "tasting the heavenly gift" and "being made sharers of the Spirit"?

Sieht man im Heiligen Geist die 'Gabe', die man 'geschmeckt hat', dann ist das 'teilhaftig sein des

⁴⁰Riggenbach, op. cit., p. 154.

⁴¹Op. cit., p. 149.

Heiligen Geistes' eine Steigerung der zweiten Aussage; dann waeren zweites und drittes Partizip ganz eng aneinander angeschlossen (H. Windisch).⁴²

That would be one way of relating the two phrases. Following Westcott, we would take both expressions (tasting and sharing) as a fuller explanation of the fact of Christian illumination.

This twofold blessing--the substance of illumination--describes first the conscious possession of the principle of life and then the sense of fellowship in a vaster life.⁴³

In regarding this "sharing of the Holy Ghost" as a "fellowship in a vaster life", Westcott is undoubtedly drawing on the distinction which he makes between *μέτοχος* and *κοινωνός*.

As distinguished from *κοινωνός*, which suggests the idea of personal fellowship (c. 10:33), *μέτοχος* describes participation in some common blessing or privilege, or the like. The bond of union lies in that which is shared and not in the persons themselves.⁴⁴

Thus, if we interpret Bishop Westcott correctly, he maintains that "tasting the heavenly gift" involves the personal possession of Christ who is the Life, the intimate and individual union of the believer with his Lord. That would be the first aspect of enlightenment. But, through the participation of the Spirit, the believer is also swept up into a wider fellowship of the Spirit, the Body of Christ, the *ἐκκλησία*.

⁴²Quoted by Michel, op. cit., p. 148.

⁴³Op. cit., p. 148.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 73.

γεννηθέντας Again we note the passive voice in the participle. This action of the Spirit upon men and in men is solely God's action. Men do not work; they are worked upon. They do not consecrate themselves; they are consecrated. Throughout, God is the actor, men are acted upon. The use of the active voice belongs exclusively to the Lord. The participle is in the aorist. We like to regard it as being punctiliar (the same as *φωτισθέντας*), thereby giving to the action of the verb a certain definite, final quality. Again the "once for allness" of the epistle seems to assert itself.

The fact of illumination including the two elements of the communication of the divine (personal) life and the participation in the divine (social) life, is followed by the fact of individual apprehension of the beauty of the message of God and of the manifestations of the higher life. The Christian life has been realized not only in its essential beginnings but in the fulness of its power.⁴⁵

καὶ καλὸν γευσάμενους θεοῦ ἔῃμα "and have tasted the goodness of the Word of God"⁴⁶ *γεύομαι* is used here with the same emphasis as in verse 4. Again it expresses the idea of personal, experiential contact. It can refer to both physical and spiritual tasting. Michel has this to say on the word:

Schmecken (*γεύομαι*) haengt in 6,5 mit einer festen juedischen Wendung zusammen; es fragt sich daher, wie weit dasselbe Verbum in 6,4 vergeistigt ist. Es kann schon im A. T. ein besonderes Widerfahrnis bzw. eine Erfahrung zum Ausdruck bringen, ohne einen Genuss

⁴⁵Westcott, op. cit., p. 149.

⁴⁶Revised Standard Version.

sense that we interpret the word as it stands in the text.

This Word of God is called *καλόν*. A variety of meanings may be offered for this adjective among which we submit the following five: 1) good or beautiful with respect to outward appearance (Luke 21:5); 2) good in the sense of being usable (brauchbar); 3) Perfect, immaculate; 4) Noble, morally good; 5) Pleasant (Matt. 17:4).⁵² Bauer proposes that the third usage is the one meant by the writer of the epistle. If that is the case, then the joy of these one time Christians lay in the fact that they had found God's Word to be the ultimate in every respect, genuine truth, free of the impurities of human wisdom and imperfection. Certainly, God's Word is just that, and the awareness of that fact by those to whom the Word is given, is indeed a blessing which evokes much joy. For it is infinite consolation to know that one has been conquered by absolute Truth. (Comment! The Truth of the Lord is always the conqueror; man is the conquered.) Incidentally, we are employing that word "Word" not in the sense of the cold and static letters of a book, but in the Biblical sense of the term. It includes God's dynamic activity. God's Word is power and light and life. God's Word is fire and thunder and a sword. God's Word is enacted judgment against men's sin, actualized grace to rescue men from

⁵²Ibid., p. 665.

that sin. God's Word is God's Kingdom coming, God's will being done. God's Word, whether it be described as $\xi\acute{\nu}\eta\mu\alpha$ or $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$, is never inanimate. It is always alive, on the move, since it is the very extension of Him who never rests.

We admit that Bauer's emphasis upon $\kappa\alpha\lambda\acute{o}\nu$, in this context, as that which is perfect and free of impurities is, no doubt, partially correct. Yet we feel that the goodness, the sweetness of God's Word lies not so much in the Word's ability to assure us of its truthfulness, but rather in its ability to give and confirm to us forgiveness of guilt and the life of God. We therefore contend that the writer here has in mind God's great Gospel promises and the resultant comfort such promises produce within the hearts of those who receive them.⁵³

Certainly the witness of the Old Testament bears out such an interpretation. For as Thayer points out, $\kappa\alpha\lambda\acute{o}\nu$ $\theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ $\xi\acute{\nu}\eta\mu\alpha$ is the Septuagint translation for $\text{לִבְרִיתֵינוּ} \text{לִבְרִיתֵנוּ}$ "which is spoken of the divine promises, (Josh. 21:45; Zech. 1:13), the Gospel and its promises full of consolation, Heb. 6:5."⁵⁴ We would therefore translate $\kappa\alpha\lambda\acute{o}\nu$ as that which "affects the mind agreeably, comforting and confirming."⁵⁵

⁵³So also Goodspeed, op. cit., p. 60.

⁵⁴Op. cit., p. 322. Cf. also Davidson, op. cit., p. 121.

⁵⁵Thayer, op. cit., p. 322.

The *καλὸν θεοῦ εἶμα* is very likely the soothing utterance of the Lord, which, for the writer to the Hebrews, finds its source, center, and end in the redemptive sacrifice of the Father's Son--a sacrifice that has established a covenant relationship with God which is final, complete, and eternal. Riggensbach sums it up very nicely:

Die Erleuchtung und die Wahrnehmung der himmlischen Gabe wird hervorgerufen durch die Empfindung der Freundlichkeit des goettlichen Wortes, das in der ntl Botschaft nicht mit der schreckenden und drohenden Sprache des Gesetzes, sondern in der troestlichen und erfreuenden Verkuendigung des Evangeliums an die Hoerer herantritt
⁵⁶

Michel suggests that the expressions "tasting the goodness of God's Word" and "tasting the powers of the age to come" occur in the Palestinian tradition, according to which the Patriarchs experienced "fortastes of the world to come".

Besonders Gewicht hat das letzte Partizip: 'Das schoene Wort Gottes und die Kraefte des zukuenftigen Aeons kosten'. Es hat am meisten Beruehrung mit der palaestinishen Uberlieferung, in der man vom 'Vorgeschmack der zukuenftigen Welt' redet. Nach B. B. 15 b hat Hiob. nach B. B. 16 b Bar. haben Abraham, Isaak und Jacob schon in dieser Welt etwas von der zukuenftigen Welt geschmeckt (Str. B. III 690). Auch der Ausdruck 'das gute Wort Gottes' stammt aus alter Uberlieferung (Jos 21, 45 23, 15 LXX . . . Jer. 33,14) Das 'Wort Gottes' wird den 'Kraeften des zukuenftigen Aeons' beigeordnet, d,h, es wird selbst zu einen eschatologischen Geschehnis. Ebenso ist die Gabe, die 'vom Himmel kommt', und der 'Heilige Geist an dem man teilhat' vom zukuenftigen Aeon her zu verstehen.⁵⁷

We certainly agree with Michel, that in these two

⁵⁶ Op. cit., p. 155.

⁵⁷ Op. cit., p. 148.

expressions eschatology definitely projects itself into the present. For no one will deny that a Christian does experience those cherished moments, when that great tension between the death of the flesh and the life of the Spirit, the pain of "the now" and the joy of "the not yet" is momentarily resolved. Those are moments when God's will is so done in our lives, that we are aware of its gracious operation. Those are moments when, for a brief second, we catch a glimpse of the glory of "having arrived", as contrasted to the tensions resulting from our "becoming". Such moments are rare, but they are real. And they are indeed a "foretaste" of the Paradise in which we shall be completely God's own.

A few points of grammar ought to be noted. The $\xi\acute{\nu}\alpha\delta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ *Deo* is, we feel, the Word that comes down upon men from God. It is the utterance that leaps from the lips of the living God and carries the very life of that God into the dead souls of men, so that they live again forever. We therefore assume the genitive to be subjective. As it stands in the text, $\kappa\alpha\lambda\acute{\omicron}\nu$ possesses the characteristics of a predicate adjective.⁵⁸ Notice its position at the very beginning of the phrase. The writer evidently had it in mind to bring out the surpassing sweetness of God's Gospel promises, and for that reason he placed $\kappa\alpha\lambda\acute{\omicron}\nu$ prominently at the head of

⁵⁸H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1943), p. 118.

the phrase. On the use of *ἕκμα θεοῦ* in this passage rather than *λόγος θεοῦ*. Westcott says:

'The utterance of God' Not the whole message of the Gospel (*ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ*), but some special utterance, such as that which marks the confession of faith in its true character as an utterance of God. Rom. 10:8; Eph. 5:26; Heb. 1:3; John 6:68.⁵⁹

A summary statement by Marcus Dods is perhaps in order:

Persons then are here described who have not only heard God's promises, but have themselves tasted or made trial of it and found it good. They have experienced that what God proclaims finds them, in their conscience with its resistless truth, in their best desires by quickening and satisfying them.⁶⁰

δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος"The powers of the age to come!" As the *τε* very clearly shows, this expression is also the object of the participle *γενναμένους*. We regard *μέλλοντος αἰῶνος* as a subjective genitive, for it is this "future age" which projects these powers into the Christian's present life experiences. The word *δύναμις* indicates "a power or ability inherent in a thing by virtue of its nature, or which a person or a thing puts forth."⁶¹ The writer to the Hebrews employs the word on four other occasions beside its appearance in the text (1:3; 2:4; 7:16; 11:11). In all these instances, *δύναμις* is definitely associated with a power that can be derived only from the all powerful God.

⁵⁹Westcott, op. cit., p. 149.

⁶⁰Marcus Dods, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," The Expositor's Greek Testament, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n. d.), IV, 297.

⁶¹Thayer, op. cit., p. 159.

In fact in chapter 2:4, this power is closely linked to that which the holy writer terms "gifts of the Spirit". μέλλοντος αἰῶνος

. . . the future age (also ὁ αἰὼν ἐκεῖνος, Luke 20:35; ὁ αἰὼν ὁ ἐσχόμενος, Luke 18:30; Mark 10:30; οἱ αἰῶνες οἱ ἐπεσχόμενοι, Eph. 2:7, i.e., the age after the return of Christ in majesty, the period of the consummate establishment of the divine kingdom and all its blessings: Matt. 12:32; Eph. 1:21.⁶²

αἰῶν by itself occurs quite frequently in the epistle (1:8; 5:6; 7:17; 6:20; 13:8), and, in the majority of cases, it seems to point up that which is eternal, in contrast to that which is subject to the change of death and time. Thus the word usually characterizes a person or a thing which, for the writer to the Hebrews, is of that world which is eternal reality behind the veil of that which is seen.

What are these "powers from the age to come"? That is a difficult question to answer, since the expression is rather vague.

Worin diese 'Kraefte' bestehen, wird nicht gesagt, doch erinnert man sich an 2:4 (Zeichen, Krafttaten und Geisteserteilungen). Gemeint ist sowohl die geistliche Vollmacht wie auch das Ereignis, in dem sie wirksam wird.⁶³

Evidently the writer is more intent upon calling to mind the heavenly power which produced such wonder-filled experiences, than he is about detailing a description of what these experiences actually were. "Der Ausdruck behaelt etwas Unpersoen-

⁶²Thayer, op. cit., p. 19.

⁶³Michel, op. cit., p. 148.

liches, Unbestimmtes."⁶⁴ So also Westcott:

The indefinite expression suggests the idea of the manifoldness of the energies of the spiritual order of which the believer feels some one or another (c. 2:4). The anarthrous μέλλοντος αἰῶνος, which is not found elsewhere, serves also to fix attention on the character of the 'age' as one heretofore unrealised, as distinguished from the conception of any particular future order (comp. Eph. 2:7; ch. 2:5).⁶⁵

Goodspeed believes that these "powers" have reference to the miracles which were "everywhere represented as attending the early acceptance of the Gospel".⁶⁶ We personally like the statement of Robinson:

Here the writer seems to have in mind the assurance that the Christian has of a continued life with Christ, of a power which can annul death. All the other forms of experience are conditioned in one way or another by the physical, but the faith of one who knows Christ and has felt His saving power has passed beyond the bonds of this life and is already linked with the other. In a very real sense, the Beyond is already here for him.⁶⁷

To know Christ is to experience Him in an intimate and personal way. It is to be known by Him, to be taken hold of by Him, to be made a "new creature" in His "new creation". A person re-created by Christ is a person in Christ, a person

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Op. cit., p. 150.

⁶⁶ Op. cit., p. 60.

⁶⁷ T. H. Robinson, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," The Moffatt New Testament Commentary, based on the New Translation by the Rev. Prof. James Moffatt (New York: Harper and Brothers, n.d.), pp. 66-67.

who has, to the fullest reality, "put on Christ". In his baptism he has actually been made a sharer in Christ's death, that is, he has once for all passed from the old aeon governed by that triad of terror, devil, death, and hell; he has been translated into the new aeon of that life both revealed and hidden in the Christ of God. It is baptism that sets off the tension between the life of "the now" and the life of "the not yet", the life of "having begun" and the life of "having arrived".

Since the Christian is in Christ, all that has happened to the Savior has already happened to him. In Christ he has died, he has been quickened, he has been made to "sit with Christ in heavenly places" (Eph. 2:4-6). Heaven will not become his; it is his. The "kingdom and the power and the glory" are his present possession.

This same apostle Paul, who could speak so eloquently on the present reality of eschatological blessings in the life of an earth-bound believer, at the same time bewails the undeniable fact of his total imprisonment in "this body of death" (Rom. 7:24), a body from which he cries to Christ for ultimate deliverance. The new creation, wholly redeemed from evil and re-created to God, still "groaneth and travaileth" until it be freed from "the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:21-22). In this tension the Christian lives. Yet, to the extent that he is in Christ, he

has indeed "tasted the powers of this future age" and is even now where Christ has gone. The boundaries of death and time are dissolved in a realization of these powers, as they rise up amidst the chaos of the present.

The close relationship between "tasting the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come" is quite evident. The reason, perhaps, as Davidson maintains, is that the consummate blessings of these powers lies in the future. Therefore, by necessity, they must be "combined with the good word of promise".⁶⁸ That is undoubtedly true. In addition, we might add that this "good word of promise" is itself that very power by which God establishes communion with men and thereby projects the blessings of that which is to come into that which now is.

Viewed in the context of the epistle, one who has "tasted the powers of the age to come" is a person who, by faith in the sacrifice of the perfect High Priest, has entered into a fellowship with God that is perfect and eternal. And, in such a relationship, he experiences the constant projection of the ultimate joy of full communion with his Lord, as it breaks in upon the sorrow of his present struggles and pains. Yet, it is a joy in the tension of conflict, a peace in the midst of war. He has, yet he does not have. And until

⁶⁸Davidson, op. cit., p. 121.

that consummation when the "powers of this future age" exert their full influence upon him in uninterrupted glory, until then, the Hebrew Christian must sweat and toil and bleed. He must not give up or go back. For to do that is to be swept back into the death of the old aeon, from which there is no resurrection. How can he regress? For "the powers of the age to come" are upon him, powers that enable him to fasten his eyes upon the fast approaching heights of that eternal world of which he is already a part. The eternal world, in which perfection replaces imperfection; life, death; joy, pain; strength, weakness! In that power the Hebrew Christian is made strong for any task, toil, or tear of life.

Before entering upon an actual consideration of the apostasy described in the text, we shall present a few summary statements on the ground just covered. Each of the four experiences painted by the writer to set forth the Christian life has a certain "once for allness" about it. All the participles are in the aorist tense. The act of God upon these people should have been decisive and final. Though the mark and the blessings of this act of restoration are constant upon the lives of those so renewed, the act itself should have been a *ἀπαρτίως*, a once for all event. The resurrection from death to life should happen just once.

The Christian life here presented possesses an intensely

experienced absorption into the reality of that which faith in Christ brings. This is no surface touch with God.

In the 'heavenly gift', in the 'Holy Spirit', and in the 'powers of the age to come', Ultimate Reality has projected itself into time through Christ. It has laid hold on these Christians, not simply as enlightenment or truth, but as life and power.⁶⁹

To a certain extent, we have to do here with realized eschatology.

Westcott makes this interesting observation:

It is significant that in the enumeration of the divine gifts received by those who are afterwards conceived as falling away, there is no one which passes out of the individual. All are gifts of power, of personal endowment. There is no gift of love In this connexion it will be noted that it was the presence of love among the Hebrews which inspired the Apostle with confidence (v. 10).⁷⁰

The author's description has been of those who not only have professed Christian faith, but also have tasted and experienced its comfort and power, have breathed its invigorating atmosphere, have been in the inner room of God's redemptive love. Like a blow that stuns the imagination, comes the last participle, *παρὰ πτερόντας*, "and have fallen away".⁷¹ We give the aorist its full weight here, for we feel that the author has in mind an apostasy which has actually happened.⁷² Yet, in its

⁶⁹William Manson, The Epistle to the Hebrews (London: Hodder and Stoughton LTD., 1951), p. 63.

⁷⁰Op. cit., p. 150.

⁷¹Not "if they should fall" (Cf. Davidson, op. cit., p. 121.).

⁷²See also Westcott, op. cit., p. 150.

application to the Hebrew Christians, such a picture of apostasy must be taken as being purely hypothetical (verses 9 f). In the other four participial phrases, the author has a

. . . real Christian history before him (perhaps that of the Hebrew Christians themselves); beyond this point, he has only a supposed case. For to prevent this supposition from becoming a reality is the earnest aim of the whole Epistle, and especially of this passage.⁷³

πασαπίπτω means literally "to fall beside a pers. or thing; to slip aside; hence to deviate from the right path, to turn aside, to wander".⁷⁴ The word is a hapaxlegomenon in the New Testament. In the Septuagint, it is used as a translation for the Hebrew word פָּלַא , which suggests the idea of a falling away "from the true faith, from the worship of Jehovah (Ezk. 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27)".⁷⁵ The derived noun, *πασαπίπωμα*, is common, and "both verb and noun occur together in Ezk. 14:13 and in 15:8".⁷⁶ According to Michel, das hebr. פָּלַא kann aber auch durch *ἀποστῆναι* wiedergegeben werden (II Chron. 26:18; 28:19; 29:6; 30:7)"⁷⁷

Die Gemeinde scheint dies Wort auch ohne naechere Erlaeuterung als 'Abfall' verstanden zu haben; gemeint ist nicht jede beliebige schwere Suende, sondern der Bruch mit der Vergangenheit, die Preisgabe der christlichen Wahrheit.⁷⁸

⁷³Davidson, op. cit., pp. 121-2.

⁷⁴Thayer, op. cit., p. 485.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Westcott, op. cit., p. 150.

⁷⁷Michel, op. cit., p. 149. See also 3:12, where the writer speaks of a fatal "falling away from the living God"; also 10:39.

⁷⁸Michel, op. cit., p. 149.

Though this idea of a complete repudiation of the Christian faith and life is undoubtedly the intended emphasis of the word in the text, yet, as Michel points out:

Allerdings braucht *παράπλιττείν* diese spezielle Bedeutung nicht immer zu haben. Das Wort muss aber von der christlichen Gemeinde als verhuellende Umschreibung eines schwerwiegenden Sachverhaltes gebraucht und verstanden sein.⁷⁹

Compare also 3:12; 10:26; 10:29.

Before advancing farther in a discussion of *παράπλοῦναι*, we must first establish whether the word paints a picture of absolute and total apostasy from the faith, or whether it serves to describe merely an especially severe fall. We firmly believe that it is the former situation which the author has in mind, and we submit the following reasons for our conclusion.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews set for himself one great goal. That was to point out the uniqueness, the finality, the incomparable greatness of the Christian revelation. And since he was addressing himself to people who had begun to think otherwise with regard to the Christian faith, the writer again and again sounded forth solemn warnings against a complete abandonment of that religion which alone avails before God. Not that his flock had taken such a step (6:9 f), but they were in serious danger of doing so. They had to be warned lest they become guilty of a radical rejection of Christ.

⁷⁹Ibid.

Our writer gives his attention not to sins as such, but to that one great sin of unbelief, a denial of Jesus that is final and complete. Viewed in the light of this purpose, the passage before us becomes perhaps the outstanding signal of danger in the entire letter, standing as a strong guard rail to protect the Hebrew believers from falling off the way of Jesus into the death pit of unbelief. Thus when we look on *ΠΑΡΑΠΕΒΟΥΤΑΣ* in such a context we feel that we are justified in regarding the word as another mode of expression similar to those in 3:12, 10:26, and 10:39, expressions used by the author to describe that fatal break with Christ which he is trying so desperately to prevent.

We advance also this reason for our interpretation. If Hebrews 6:4-8 presents a description of those who become guilty of some especially great and mortal sin, then the impossibility of repentance which is predicated to them would be a direct contradiction of both the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul.⁸⁰ Then the repentance of Peter could not actually have taken place, but must have been a mere sham. Then the fifty-first Psalm, a masterpiece forged from the very depths of a "broken and a contrite heart", is just an eloquent fake. For if those who commit severely hideous sins are denied a return to the faith, then both Peter and David were lost beyond recall. And from

⁸⁰Farrar, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

the Scriptural accounts, we are certain that this was not the case.

It is for these two reasons that we agree with Davidson when he maintains:

Falling away does not mean falling into sin, even grievous sin, but renouncing the faith of Christ wholly. It is called 'sinning wilfully', that is apostatizing against experience and better knowledge, in x.26, where the history and experience described in verses 4.5 is called 'receiving the knowledge of truth.'⁸¹

We feel that Davidson is certainly correct when he makes the assertion that this apostasy involves a wilful and conscious rejection of Christianity. The context bears this out. These people had tasted and found Christianity good. To reject something as deeply personal as this, must involve a conscious participation of the will. For the ἐκουσίως of 10:26, though not specifically mentioned, is most assuredly implied in the text. Thus with Farrar:

. . . he is speaking only of predetermined and wilful apostasy, and irrevocable Divine dereliction; much as is described in that passage of Isaiah (Is. 8:21) where the Prophet speaks of renegades passing through the land hardly beasted, and hungry, and fretting themselves, and looking upwards only to curse their King and their God, and seeing nothing but dimness and anguish when they look downwards. Beyond this we cannot go.⁸²

"Falling away", then, involved absolute apostasy. Wherein did this apostasy consist? Westcott thinks it was a relapse

⁸¹Op. cit., p. 122.

⁸²Op. cit., p. 387.

into Judaism.⁸³ Manson concludes that such an assumption is not entirely justified from the contents of the letter: "The letter does not actually speak of apostasy to Judaism. It does speak of apostasy from the living God"84

Though Manson is undoubtedly correct in stating that the text of the letter "does not actually speak of apostasy to Judaism", it must be remembered that the writer spends considerable time contrasting the Levitical priesthood with the final and perfect priesthood of Jesus, comparing the incomplete communion with God established by the Old Testament covenant with the complete fellowship with the Lord achieved through the sacrifice of the priest of Calvary. Would he have done such a thing, if the possibility of a fatal relapse into the religion of the Fathers had not run through his mind? It must be conceded, however, that the chief danger confronting these Christians was the possible repudiation of Christianity as such. What they might have had in mind as a substitute, we do not know.

πάλιν "Anew!" or "Again!" The basic meaning of the word seems to "denote renewal or repetition of the action" of the verb to which it is joined.⁸⁵ That which the writer claims as *ἁδύνατον* is the *πάλιν* of repentance. The foundation has been laid; it will not be laid again (6:1 f). Repentance has

⁸³Op. cit., p. xxxv.

⁸⁴Op. cit., p. 16.

⁸⁵Thayer, op. cit., p. 475.

been begun; it will not be begun again. The direction of the epistle is always forward. Backward is only death. Not repetition, but progression!

$\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\kappa\alpha\iota\upsilon\acute{\nu}\epsilon\iota\upsilon$ means "to renew, renovate (cf. Germ. auffrischen)".⁸⁶ The word occurs only here in the New Testament. The Septuagint uses it in Lam. 5:21, in which the prophet requests the Lord to "renew our days as of old".⁸⁷ Closely related, is the verb $\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\kappa\alpha\iota\upsilon\acute{\nu}\omega$, which has in it the idea of "causing to grow up new", or "making new".⁸⁸ The noun form is found in Rom. 12:2; Titus 3:5. In the latter, the action of renewal is proclaimed as a work of the Spirit.

Who is the subject of $\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\kappa\alpha\iota\upsilon\acute{\nu}\epsilon\iota\upsilon$? This is an important question. For the correct answer will determine the extent to which the impossibility of repentance reaches. We have previously stated our reason for limiting this act of a second restoration only to the power of men.⁸⁹ To make the assertion that even the strong hand of the almighty God is stymied in the case of these apostates would be a denial of the Lord's limitless power to save. Ordinarily, God binds men's salvation to the means of grace, and if these are brushed aside, as far as men are concerned, so is salvation. But to limit the almighty

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 38.

⁸⁷See also Ps. 39:2; 103:5.

⁸⁸Thayer, op. cit., p. 38. See also II Cor. 4:16. Col. 3:10.

⁸⁹Supra: p. 12.

God to such means in an absolute and unconditional way, seems to us a rather presumptuous effort to "cabin, crib and confine" the power of Him whose "ways are unsearchable and past finding out".

What is said amounts to this--that for the conversion of a deliberate apostate, God has (according to the ordinary laws of His working) no further means in store than those which have already been tried in vain.⁹⁰

Strictly speaking, that God is the subject of this verb, is not present in the text.⁹¹ And yet, as Westcott points out, "The use of the active voice limits the strict application of the words to human agency. This is all that comes within the range of the writer's argument".⁹² It must be remembered that this statement of the impossibility of a second repentance is made from the standpoint of a Christian teacher. What he means to say is this: It is impossible for Christian pastors, by their preaching and pleading, to restore again to repentance those who have turned completely aside from Christianity. That man is born from above, that he is resurrected from death to life, that he becomes a new creature in God's new creation happens, as the writer to the Hebrews indicates, just once. And it is certain no human has accomplished such a restoration, neither he who is restored, nor he who heralds the word of restoration. Rebirth requires a powerful, creative act of God. It is a

⁹⁰W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, The Life and Epistles of St. Paul (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), p. 809.

⁹¹Riggenbach, op. cit., p. 156.

⁹²Op. cit., p. 150.

miracle. It is the finger of God touching corpses and giving them life. This is true of every conversion, whether it be the first or a later one. Therefore, the writer makes it unmistakably clear, that if men who have been enlivened choose to return again to the death of unbelief, no human being will be able to achieve their second resurrection. God can, and might; but there is no guarantee that He will. It is impossible to know how often the Lord raises the dead. His power to do so is boundless, but perhaps His patience to perform such a work comes to an end. Then it is too bad--eternally.

The infinitive is present, suggesting continued and persistent effort on the part of these Christian teachers to reconvert their apostate brothers. Every opportunity is given, no stone is left unturned in this urgent endeavor to rekindle the flame of faith that has died. But even so, the Word remains a "savor of death unto death", judgment is heaped upon judgment, unless God Himself brings about an immediate change in the lives of these dead men. For man, no matter how often or how desparately he tries, "kann nicht ohne Vollmacht von Neuem anfangen".⁹³

Some have seen in ἀρδ κλιρίβειν a reference to holy baptism. According to Farrar, the early Church Fathers regarded the word to signify a second baptism.⁹⁴ ῥωτισμὸς ἐν τῷ θαλάσσῃ would then indicate that baptism of repentance which is the foundation

⁹³Michel, op. cit., p. 149.

⁹⁴Op. cit., pp. 382-3. Cf. also Behm in Kittel, op. cit., III, 453-4.

experience of the Christian life, while ἀνακαθίσειν would have reference to the identical act performed after a serious lapse of faith. Not discerning the distinction between the state of grace into which Baptism ushers the Christian, and the outward ceremony by which this is done, some of the Fathers erroneously concluded that an impossibility of a second baptism involved also an impossibility of a second restoration to grace.⁹⁵ Personally, we regard neither *πιστεύοντας* nor ἀνακαθίσειν as a reference to baptism.

εἰς μετάνοιαν "To repentance!" Repentance becomes the goal and purpose of renewal. Does the preposition *εἰς* here have the meaning "to" (the Latin *ad*; Cf. Gal. 1:6 and Rom. 2:4.), or does it retain the more basic idea of action into a state or thing? We feel it is the latter. The picture seems to be that of persons who have fallen beside the right path, or who have fallen out of the sphere of Christian grace; therefore, the *εἰς* would indicate an attempt to place such apostates back into that condition of repentance from which they have strayed.

μετάνοια is not to be understood in the light of profane Greek usage, but its New Testament meaning must be traced in the Old Testament idea of repentance (the Hebrew *שׁוּב*).

In the OT the idea of repentance is often expressed by such words as 'turn', 'return'. The fundamental idea behind the use of these words in a religious sense is that of subjects who had rebelled coming back to serve their rightful king, or of a faithless wife returning to her

⁹⁵See Farrar, *op. cit.*, p. 383.

husband, or of those who had been seduced by the baals returning to worship Jehovah. In this sense 'turning' means much more than a mere change of mind, though it includes this; it represents a reorientation of one's whole life and personality, which includes the adoption of a new ethical line of conduct, a forsaking of sin and a turning to righteousness.⁹⁶

That repentance had a fixed place with certain fixed forms in the Old Testament cultus of worship is evident from the following passages: I Kings 8:33 f; Joel 2:15-18; Is. 58:5; Jer. 3:21-24; Is. 63:7-64. The prophetic cry for repentance emphasized the need for "rent hearts" rather than the burnt offerings of lambs and bulls.⁹⁷

The basic sense in the prophetic idea of repentance is a radical reversal in all domains of life. There is present a personal conception of sin as a direct revolt against God (Hos. 1-3; Is. 1:2; Jer. 1:16). Repentance therefore assumes the form of a personal return unto the Lord (Amos 4:6 ff). The concurrent results of genuine repentance will be obedience to the Lord's will (Hos. 6:1-6; Jer. 34:15), a complete trust in the Lord (Hos. 14:3; Jer. 3:22; Is. 30:15), and a turning away from all evil (Jer. 18:8; Ezk. 3:19; 33:11). Psalm 51 is an example par excellence of the whole idea of Old Testament repentance. Perhaps the one outstanding characteristic of the repentance which David desires in this Psalm is the fact that God alone

⁹⁶Alan Richardson, A Theological Word Book of the Bible, edited by Alan Richardson (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1952), p. 191.

⁹⁷For a prophetic criticism of the merely ritualistic idea of repentance see Is. 58:5-7.

must create his turning. It is God alone who must give to men repentance and a clean heart (Ps. 51:10; Ezk. 36:26; Jer. 31:33). Repentance is never a self-achievement. It is always God's gift.

The Septuagint does not translate $\aleph \gamma \kappa \iota$ with $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha\nu\omicron\epsilon\omega$, but employs the Greek $\epsilon\pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\omega$ or $\alpha\pi\omicron\sigma\tau\epsilon\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\omega$. However, $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha\nu\omicron\epsilon\omega$ is used for the Hebrew $\pi \pi \daleth$ which has the idea of "feeling sorry for something". It is in the proclamation of John that $\mu\epsilon\tau\acute{\alpha}\nu\omicron\iota\alpha$ receives its first New Testament link with the Old Testament $\aleph \gamma \kappa \iota$. For the repentance of John demanded a total renovation of life, and not just sorrow for the past (Matt. 3:2.8.11; Luke 1:16; Luke 3:10 ff). Likewise, also the repentance required by our Lord Himself continues this same Old Testament significance of a total turning to God in all domains of life (Matt. 12:33-37). The repentance of Jesus is drastic in its insistence on a complete turning away from all that hinders absolute obedience to the will of God (Matt. 5:29; 6:19 ff; 7:13 ff; 10:32-39). Once a man has truly repented, life can never again be the same.⁹⁸ And again Jesus sounds forth this hard fact, that the repentance He demands of men, is utterly impossible for them to achieve by themselves; it must be worked on them by God (Mark 10:26-27).⁹⁹

⁹⁸Cf. The Sermon on the Mount, addressed to disciples; the Fifth Petition; Matt. 18:1-4.

⁹⁹For much of the material in these last two paragraphs we are indebted to Prof. Martin Franzmann's "Notes on New Testament Theology" (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Mimeo Co., 1952), pp. 4.5.13.

In both Jesus and John, then, we have the basic idea of the Old Testament concept of repentance, an idea which, in the New Testament, "is deepened and made a sine qua non for entry into the Kingdom of God. (Cf. Mark 1:15; Matt. 4:17; Matt. 21:32.)"¹⁰⁰ Certainly that is understandable, when one stops to realize that if God is to rule men by the redemption of Jesus, men must be brought into submission to that rule; and this is done only through the radical reversal of repentance. One is ruled by God only after he is made to deny kingship to his own will and impulses. And that exchange of regal power from self to God takes place only in "rent hearts" and "poor spirits" and "contrite souls". Before God's Kingdom comes, His will, not ours, must be done. He must be joyfully acknowledged as God and Creator, Lord and Redeemer, while we assume the rightful place as created dust before Him. And that happens only in repentance.

In addition to this close relationship between *μετάνοια* and the *Βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ* there is also in the New Testament a strong connection between *μετάνοια* and faith.

Jesus makes 'repent and believe' the key-note of His Galilean preaching (Mark 1:15), thus indicating the integral connexion between repentance and faith. The encounter with Christ produced both these things in men's hearts (cf. Zacchaeus, Luke 19:1-10),

To awaken to repentance is part and parcel of the awakening to faith; repentance means turning from sin just as faith involves turning to God. Repentance thus

¹⁰⁰ Richardson, op. cit., p. 191.

means much more than being sorry for one's misdeeds; it involves the active receptance of God's gift of faith. Jesus' supreme teaching on this matter is found in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15); and the adjacent parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin stress the 'joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth'. Indeed, the whole mission of Jesus is represented under the figure of the Good Shepherd going out to seek and to save the lost, to lead to repentance those who have gone astray (cf. Mark 3:13-17). Small wonder, then, that the earliest Apostolic kerugma (preaching) always included the call for repentance, since without it faith itself is impossible.¹⁰¹

Viewed in terms of faith, repentance becomes a radical repudiation of trust in one's self, an abandonment of self-confidence, and a casting of one's self wholly on the mercy of God. To accept God as Lord is to believe in Him, that is, to acknowledge His verdict against guilt, and to render the heart's assent to the deliverance offered in Christ. It is interesting to note that in the *Βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ*, *μετάνοια*, and *πίστις*, there is present that twofold aspect of the Kingdom, the fire of God's judgment against sin, and the baptism of the Spirit, the deliverance of God's forgiveness and restoration to life, given to men by the redemption of Jesus.

We should like to bring out just one more point. Not only is repentance basic for entrance into God's Kingdom; it is also indispensable for continued living in the Kingdom. Perhaps it is necessary to distinguish here between the radical repentance of conversion, that initial resurrection from the grave of

¹⁰¹Ibid.

unbelief to faith in Christ, and the repentance which is the Christian's daily life. For the child of God, though he is perfect as far as he is a new creature in Christ, is simultaneously a creature of imperfection, in as much as he is "sold under sin". Since this tension of the simul iustus et peccator exists constantly within him, the Christian has constant need of turning from self-worship to the worship of the Lord. Repentance, in this sense, becomes a life-long process.

It is our opinion, that the writer to the Hebrews uses *μετάνοια* in the passage before us with this combined Apostolic-Old Testament emphasis which we have attempted briefly to outline. For him, these apostates, whom he is describing, have severed themselves from this life of continual turning from sin to Savior, a turning which is perhaps the outstanding characteristic of communion with the living God. They have rejected Christ (as the next words show) in whom alone God speaks to men the Word of life and forgiveness, in whom alone the redemptive rule of God is established in men's hearts. When repentance goes, so does faith, and the Kingdom, and Christ, and God. Then he who has been turned around turns back to the devil domain from which God in Christ has rescued him and remains there forever unless God again re-creates him. *μετάνοια* might include all the blessings and the responsibilities involves in the four preceding participial phrases. Repentance is the beginning, end, and all of Christian living. When it ceases, so does enlightenment, and tasting of the

heavenly gift, etc.

The author of Hebrews gives the reason why a restoration to repentance is impossible. ἀνασταυροῦντας ἑαυτοῖς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ παραδειγματίζοντας "Since they continually crucify to themselves (to their own judgment) the Son of God and constantly hold Him up to open shame!" According to Michel, ἀνασταυροῦν "heisst eigentlich nur kreuzigen . . . , doch wird das Verbum von den Kirchenvaetern verstaerkt wiedergegeben (aufs Neue kreuzigen) vulg.: rursum crucifigentes;"102 Westcott adds this, that "ἀνασταυροῦν in classical Greek has the idea of raising on a cross, crucifying with the additional notion of exposure".103

The participle is present. This crucifixion is a continuous thing, as is also the "holding up to open shame".

The present tense implies a continuous, as well as an insolent apostasy. It implies the case of those who cling deliberately to their sins (ἐκουσίως ἀμαρτανόων, x. 26). While this continues, how can there be any hope of renewal? The condition of such men, as long as it continues unchanged, precludes all possibility of the action of grace. It is impossible at once 'to be pardoned' and to retain the offence It is impossible to save willing offenders in the sense in which man may 'save' his brother (I Tim. 4:16); but nothing is impossible to God.104

This crucifixion is described as being ἑαυτοῖς. This could signify a crucifixion which virtually puts these apostates in

102 Op. cit., p. 149.

103 Op. cit., p. 151.

104 Farrar, op. cit., p. 383.

the same position of the Jews who crucified Jesus, or it could mean "to their own loss and condemnation. Compare Rom. 13:2; Matt. 23:31; Gal. 6:14".¹⁰⁵ The dative is the dative of disadvantage. Both ideas are probably present.

Once again we must emphatically maintain that the writer in no way asserts the existence of this apostasy among the Hebrew Christians. In fact, in verse 9, he makes the blanket statement that it is not present. With this fact in mind it might be possible to render these two participles in this way: "so long as", or "if they persist in crucifying the Son of God etc".¹⁰⁶

What is this crucifixion of the Son of God? We note in passing the term *τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ*. The heinousness of the crime is augmented by the fact that it is God's very Son whom these people crucify. How is this crime related to the historic crucifixion of Jesus by the Jews? To these questions we must now direct our attention.

We shall answer the last question first. Though the actual event of the cross has been written on the pages of history, and the exalted Christ lives, to die no more at the right hand of His Father's glory, yet the significance and power of the cross continue in the historical process, as men are constantly being brought to the foot of that cross through faith. Through the medium of faith, men transcend the boundaries of space and

¹⁰⁵Westcott, op. cit., p. 151.

¹⁰⁶See also Farrar, op. cit., p. 385.

time and still stand before the Crucified. Thus the cross and He who hangs thereon become directly related to each generation of men.

To that cross men may react in one of two ways. Either they will confess *Ἰησοῦς Κύριος* or *Ἰησοῦς ἀράδνα*. The first is faith, the second, unbelief. And even as the believer has an existential share in the benefits bestowed by that redemption, so the unbeliever, by his rejection actually repeats the same crime of the Jewish nation and with them brands Christ as a cursed criminal and a Pseudo-Messiah.¹⁰⁷ In this sense, an unbeliever, a fallen Christian can be said to "re-crucify Christ". In this way the cross of Jesus, meant by God for man's blessing, becomes a terrible judgment. "The savor of life" has been turned into a "savor of death".

It must be remembered that this crucifixion of Christ by apostates does not involve the Savior in a re-experience of the torture and torment of the cross. As the pronoun *ἑαυτοῖς* clearly shows, this is a crucifixion which works only to the disadvantage of the crucifiers and not to the one crucified. The renegades suffer, not Christ. Even as the executors of the cross rejected Christ and paid for it dearly, so also these apostates.

What is this continual crucifixion of the Son of God? For the Hebrew Christians it might perhaps take the form of a

¹⁰⁷Cf. Rigenbach. op. cit., p. 157.

deliberate repudiation of the perfect sacrifice and redemption of the Messiah High Priest. Far from regarding Christ as God's eternal Son in whom the Lord speaks His last and final Word of redemption to men, these apostates declare Jesus to be an impostor and a fake. Christ is not the ἀληθεια of God incarnate, but a cunning deceiver. There are other ways to gain access to the eternal world of God apart from this Christ. Therefore, away with Him.

That is crucifixion of the Son of God. To crucify Christ is to deny His claim as God's Messiah sent from above to reveal God, and to rescue men from this perishable world to the new creation which stands and endures. To crucify Christ is to say "No" to the "Yes" of God's Son. To crucify the Son of God is to attempt to enter life by another Door, another Way, another Truth apart from the one offered at Calvary. It is the futile effort to find salvation in another Name other than Jesus.

"Perhaps there is the further thought in the image of the crucifixion that Christ dwells in the believer. To fall away from faith is therefore to slay Him. Contrast Gal. 6:14."¹⁰⁸ We would support Bishop Westcott's statement as being essentially correct. For a Christian is a man in whom the εἶψω, the autonomous spirit of rebellion against God, the unregenerate σαβασμ which refuses to let God's Kingship come and His will be done, this rebellious εἶψω has been "crucified with Christ".

¹⁰⁸ Westcott, op. cit., p. 151.

No longer does this spirit live to dictate the impulses of the Christian. In its place rules the Spirit of Christ, the Crucified. "By the faith of the Son of God" the Christian now lives (Gal. 2:20), and by this faith he is made to crucify the flesh with its passions and desires, the former world of death whose gods he previously worshipped in total devotion (Gal. 5:24). In fact it is inconceivable for the Christian to think of life apart from Christ. For life is no longer himself, but Jesus (Phil. 1:21). In Christ, he shares in the blessings of the new creation, and counts Jesus all his gain (Phil. 3:8); all else is loss and refuse. The deliverance of the cross alone becomes his glory, and in the crucifixion of Christ the Christian too has been crucified to the world (Gal. 6:14). World and self crucified, Christ glorified! That is the living principle of a lively temple of the Spirit. But for a man who "has fallen away and again crucified the Son of God" the reverse sets in, and once again world and self are worshipped, and Christ is declared loss.

παράδειγμα τίσορας There seems to be a progression in the author's thought. Not only do these apostates crucify Christ, but they continually (note the present participle!) "hold Him up to contempt". The verb itself means: "to set forth as an example, make an example of in a bad sense, to hold up to infamy; to expose to public disgrace".¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹Thayer, op. cit., p. 480.

The word is another hapaxlegomenon in the New Testament. However, *σειματίσειν* is used by Matthew (1:19) to describe the consideration of Joseph in keeping his pregnant fiance out of the public eye. The reason for his action was that he did not want to expose her to open shame. Thus we might render *σειματίσειν*. The verb does occur in the Septuagint in Num. 25:4; Je. 13:22; Ezk. 28:17; Dan. 2:5. In the Numbers passage "it implies exposing to ignominy or infamy such as was effected in barbarous times by exposing the quarters of the executed criminal or leaving him hanging in chains".¹¹⁰ The word seems to connote a most devilish type of public ridicule and putting to shame.

It is impossible for men who were once Christians to sink any lower than this. Not only do they inwardly reject Christ, since it is our conviction that for the writer the act of crucifixion was an apostasy primarily of the heart, but they also openly despise Him and publicly curse His name. These fallen men leave no doubt in the minds of their families and friends as to their opinion of this pseudo-Christ. With their lips they proclaim their hostility and hatred. These apostates become the apostolic version of those Jews of a generation before who slapped the cheek of Jesus, spit in His face, mocked Him as a false prophet and a fake king. Certainly, this is not just a mild dislike. This is hostile hatred. This is the

¹¹⁰Dods, op. cit., p. 229.

most defiant "No!" a man can fling against the "Yes!" of God's Gospel.

The writer does not offer specific details on the form of this crime. He merely employs a word which describes in unmistakable terms the length to which the apostasy of these one-time Christians has gone. In these fallen saints, the evilness of evil has reached its limit. For not only have they themselves crossed Christ from their hearts, but, by their public defamation of the Savior, they bring others to the waterfall of doubt that may plunge them also into the swirling death of unbelief. Thus these men incur a double guilt against themselves that will prove fearful in the day of Judgment. In their hearts they have spurned the Savior, with their lips they have openly ridiculed His name. And with that, the last faint shadow of light is gone, and the darkness of death is once again final and complete. Now nothing remains but the fury of fire and the fearful falling into the hands of the living God (10:27.29). And fearful it will be indeed. For these men are hell bound, not because they did not know Jesus, but for the very reason that they did. They had light, but they loved darkness. They did taste the sweetness of God's salvation, but they let Him go. They did experience eternal life in the reality of the new creation, but they preferred eternal death. From such heights they fell to such depths. From Life at its fullest to death at its deepest--that is their tragedy. That is their guilt.

To a serious minded Christian, this fact that a person

can be great and strong in his faith in the Savior, and yet fall so terribly that he loses hold of Christ entirely and forever comes as a hard jolt. We are seized with holy awe, perhaps even a pang of holy fear, as we ponder this possibility for us, this reality in others. Are there certain sins which warn that apostasy is about to set in, which describe apostasy that has already happened? Are there other sins, apart from an open denunciation of Christ, mortal sins perhaps, which indicate the presence of a "falling away" from the state of grace? If so, what are they? Is there an answer in the Epistle?

Though the primary emphasis of the entire letter directs itself against a possible apostasy from the Christian faith, yet the writer does speak of certain specific sins which can also be fatal to the believer. In chapter 10:26-31 the author sounds a solemn warning against deliberate sinning in the face of better knowledge. And in 12:16 f the immorality and profanity (*πόρνος, βέβηλος*) of Esau in selling his birthright are cited as mortal sins which deny a second repentance. Yet, as Michel points out, "Es ist nicht sicher, wie weit der Kreis der 'schweren' Sünden zu ziehen ist, gegen die unser Brief kaempft."¹¹¹ The sin that threatened the Hebrew Christians was the failure to recognize in Christ God's final and decisive revelation of Himself, and redemption to Himself.¹¹²

¹¹¹Op. cit., p. 150.

¹¹²This same double Messianic purpose presents itself also in the Gospel of John.

It is unbelief that the writer fears, and to prevent this fear from becoming fact is his earnest intention.

There are in the Old Testament definite admonitions which have paved the way for the warning expressed in the passage before us. In Ezk. 18:21 ff the prophet differentiates between a conversion of the wicked unto righteousness, and of the righteous unto wickedness. He reasons thus: If the wicked turns from his sins and practices justice and righteousness, he shall live. But if the righteous turns from righteousness and does evil, he shall die in his sins (v. 24). A part of sincere repentance must always involve shedding the rags of sin and donning the garments of righteousness.

The Jewish Rabbinate submits five different cases in which repentance is declared to be impossible: 1. In the case of a person who sins carelessly, trusting in a second repentance. Michel quotes Rabbi Roma as saying that God does not give the possibility of repentance to a man who declares, "I will sin and then repent".¹¹³ Abot. R. Nathan establishes this five-fold category of those who do not receive forgiveness;

Wer viele Busse tut, weil er die Sünde nicht lässt;
wer viel sündigt; wer in einem reinen Zeitalter sündigt;
wer sündigt, um hinterher Busse zu tun; und auf wem die
Schuld der Entheiligung des göttlichen Namens liegt
.....¹¹⁴

2. In the case of a person who knows God's power but nevertheless

¹¹³ Michel, op. cit., p. 151.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

rebels against it. 3. In the case of a person who at first stubbornly refuses repentance, as, for example Pharaoh whose heart the Lord hardened because of his continued resistance against the divine will. God is patient, but not forever.

4. In the case of a person who is completely drowned in sins. According to Michel, Pinechas has said: "Wer den Sunden voellig anheimgefallen ist, der kann nicht in sich gehen, und ihm wird in Ewigkeit keine Vergebung."¹¹⁵ 5. In the case of the person who leads the multitude into sin.¹¹⁶ Thus in the opinion of the Rabbis, there are certain other sins beside a pronounced break with Christ which bring with them an impossibility to repentance.

Are there perhaps sins which can be mistakenly regarded as indications of apostasy? Bruce has the following to say on the matter:

. . . there are phases of the spiritual life liable to be mistaken for symptoms of apostasy, which are truly interpreted only when looked at in the light of the great law of gradual growth enunciated by our Lord in the parable of the blade, the green ear, and the full corn in the green ear. (Mark 4:26-29) The difficult problem of Christian experience cannot be mastered unless we grasp the truth taught in that parable, and know the characteristics of each stage, and especially of the second, which are most liable to be misunderstood. For lack of such knowledge many a Christian, destined to reach a splendid spiritual manhood, has seemed to himself and others to have fallen away utterly from grace, faith, and goodness, while he was simply passing through the stage of the

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶We owe much to Michel for the material of these last two paragraphs (op. cit., p. 151).

green fruit, with all its unwelcome yet wholesome experiences.¹¹⁷

It is according to the divine will and pattern that growth in faith comes only through trial. The mature "corn" of saintly surrender to the Lord develops only after difficult days in the green immaturity of many soul struggles and many bitter defeats.

At this point, we should like to summarize our conclusions concerning the impossibility of repentance. Once again we affirm our conviction that this restoration from death to life is prohibitive only for men. Both the active voice of the verb ἀποκαταστήσειν, indicating human agency alone, and the unlimited power of God to save substantiate our position. And though we are ready to concede, that as far as we can determine, God has confined His redemptive power to the means of grace, yet that certainly does not compel us to conclude that the Lord therefore cannot redeem men apart from these divine instruments of salvation. We admit, it is likely that God will abandon malicious apostates. But if He does, it is because He wills to do so, and not because He must. His patience is at an end. The hour of grace is past. We do not deny the gracious will of the Lord that continually desires the salvation of all (I Tim. 2:4). We merely emphasize this fact: The Lord refuses to force Himself on anyone. Therefore when men cry "No!" to Christ, God will not grab them by the neck and choke them into a "Yes!". Faith is indeed the gift of God to dead men; but it

¹¹⁷Op. cit., pp. 211 f.

is also the responsive worship of enlivened men to the God who breathed life into their souls. This is no attempt to penetrate the mystery of the Christian faith, a faith which is a divine work alone, yet a work which God calls upon men to perform for themselves, though He knows they are absolutely incapable of doing it. We make no effort to resolve this baffling tension: God alone is totally responsible for faith; man alone is totally responsible for unbelief.

The question naturally arises: If it is God's power that brings men to faith and keeps men in faith, what happens when men do not believe, when men who once believed again disbelieve? Has the human overcome the divine? Yes, to the extent that God will not drag people into heaven against their will. No, to the extent that God still possesses the power to resurrect corpses when and how often He wills. Certainly, in the case of a man who will not let God re-create him, it is possible to say that God cannot "restore him to repentance". Mysterious as it sounds, the finite has power to resist the Infinite and to prevail.

The reason why repentance is impossible in the case of these apostates is clearly stated. They have rejected Christ. It is here perhaps that the writer to the Hebrews becomes most like the apostle John in his emphasis on the aloneness of the Son of God as the incarnate Revelation and Redeemer of God. Men who assent to the Messianic mission of Jesus and respond with the surrender of faith and a faithfilled life--these shall

live. Men who refuse to let this *λόγος ἐν σαρκί* exert His saving power upon them shall die. For Christ is the Light, without which there is only darkness. Christ is the Life, without which there is only death. Christ is the *ἀλήθεια*, without which there is only the *ψεῦδος* of all that is evil and cannot endure. There is only one door that opens to God, and that is Jesus. There is only one *λόγος* that declares the will of God, and that is Jesus. In Christ alone God comes down to reveal Himself to men, to redeem men to Himself. Jesus is the only saving link between a *κόσμος* lost in *σάβηξ*, and the *Βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ* which endures eternally. In Christ alone the *ἐπίγεια* and the *ἐπουράνια* meet. Christ is the one Mediator between God and man (I Tim. 2:5), the one Name by which alone there is salvation (Acts 4:12). In both the Gospel of John and the Epistle to the Hebrews, Christ appears as the decisive Word of God in human flesh--the Prophet who interprets God, the Priest who sacrifices Himself to pave the perfect way for men into God's eternal presence. Therefore, to reject this Christ as a *ψεῦδος* incarnate is to reject the God who meets men in Christ.

Such a rejection must preclude any possibility of turning to God in repentance. For the only way of turning is through Him who is the Way. And outside that Way, God is not to be found. It is in Christ alone that the Deus Absconditus becomes also the Deus Revelatus. We could perhaps summarize it

this way. The power to repent comes only from God. God is to be had only in Christ. To reject Christ is to reject God. And without God, it is impossible to repent. The fatal circle is complete.

Is the apostasy here described the same as the sin against the Holy Ghost? To answer this question we must establish whether or not the falling away of these Christians in the passage before us fits the description of the unpardonable sin given by Jesus in the three Gospel narratives (Matt. 12:31-32; Mark 3:22-30; Luke 12:10). A close examination of the immediate context of these Gospel accounts reveals that Jesus speaks of the sin against the Holy Ghost in connection with the Pharasaic accusation that He was in league with Beelzebub (Matt. 12:24; Luke 11:15). Because they accused Christ of being sent from Satan, these unbelieving Jews prompted our Lord to utter such fearful words. That sin of repudiation of Christ as a deceiver from hell is, we feel, identical with the apostasy of our text. The hatred of the Jews in calling Jesus an agent of Beelzebub is the same as the ridicule of those who "re-crucify Him and hold Him up to open shame".

Though they should have known better, the Jews refused to accept Christ as God's Messiah. That is the sin against the Holy Ghost. For it is by the Holy Ghost alone that men call Jesus Lord (I Cor. 12:3). Therefore, to deny Christ as God's Redeemer, against better knowledge, is to resist

the effort of Christ's Spirit by which He endeavors to bring men to this saving confession, *Κύριος Ἰησοῦς*. That is the sin against the Holy Ghost. It is the Spirit's work to testify of Christ. To reject that testimony is to reject the Father who sent the Son, the Son who bears witness to the Father, and the Holy Ghost who reveals the Father to men in the Son. The sin against the Holy Ghost involves a rejection of the Holy Trinity.

This rejection of God is not a punctiliar event. For that would mean every sin is the sin against the Holy Ghost, since every sin in itself is a rejection of God. The unpardonable sin is not an especially severe fall, a deep mortal sin. The examples of both Peter and David bear this out. The sin against the Holy Ghost is a habit that takes hold of a man and becomes a state of active hostility against the Lord. It is a deliberate spewing forth of the Gospel after having tasted of its sweetness. Dr. Mueller says:

The sin against the Holy Ghost is committed only when the Holy Spirit clearly reveals the divine truth to the sinner and the sinner nevertheless utters blasphemies against it The sin against the Holy Ghost consists in the perverse, persistent denial and rejection of the divine truth after the latter has been sufficiently acknowledged and accepted as such, joined with voluntary and atrocious blasphemous rejection of the Gospel by a hardened sinner, who, through the gracious illumination of the Holy Ghost, has been fully convinced of its divine truth.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸J. T. Mueller, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), p. 233.

Does this definition fit the sin described in our text? We believe it does. These apostates are incapable of repentance, and as Walther points out, "It is characteristic of the sin against the Holy Ghost that the person who has committed it cannot be restored to repentance".¹¹⁹ The very purpose of the Spirit's abode in us is to work the continual re-creation of repentance; that is, He is always turning us from the unholy to the Holy, from the idolatry of self worship to the honor of the Lord, from sin to Savior. That is the heart and core of the Christian life, and when that constant renewal of repentance ceases, so does the Spirit's sway and stay.

There are two other reasons why we regard Heb. 6:4-8 as a reference to the sin against the Holy Ghost. These fallen Christians display persistent perverseness toward Christ, rebellion against better knowledge and experience, both of which are characteristic of the sin against the Spirit.¹²⁰

The following truths then must be kept in mind:

It is possible for Christians to fall irrevocably.

The cause of such a fall is in no wise due to an insufficiency of knowledge or to a failure of power in God's means of grace. The cause for apostasy and the sin against

¹¹⁹C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, reproduced from the German edition of 1897, and translated by W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), p. 396.

¹²⁰For the opposite view, see Farrar, op. cit., p. 388.

the Holy Ghost lies wholly in the wicked will of the apostates.

Though the Scriptures expressly ascribe hardness of heart to human perverseness (Matt. 23:37), yet they also speak of the God who hardens (Gen. 10:1). And that is mysterious. Following Scriptural data, we may, however, safely say that this process of divine hardening is no pre-temporal and fixed decree, but that it is the result of a stubborn rejection of Christ that has taken place in the framework of an historical confrontation with the Savior.

The Lord always reserves the right and possesses the power to restore even the greatest apostate to a life of Christian repentance, if that be His will. Such an act would be a second conversion and is possible only to the Lord. For once again, He must make unwilling rebels into willing slaves. And that feat He alone can perform.

Verses 7-8

By way of introduction to the last two verses, we quote the following statement from Westcott:

The law of human life, the condemnation which follows from the neglect of blessings, is illustrated by an example from nature. The Parables of the Lord and the usage of the prophets suggest this method of enforcing truth. We spontaneously attribute will, responsibility (πιοῦσα, τικτοῦσα, εὐλογίας μεταλαμβάνει) even to the earth. We look for certain results from certain general conditions; and not only so but we regard certain results as naturally

appropriate to certain objects. Compare Mark 4:28
ἀναστασία): Rom. 8:19 ff. The comparison between
 the processes of agriculture and moral training is
 common to all literature.

The illustration here is apparently not taken from
 the familiar image of the field and the seed and the
 sower. The case is rather that of the natural produce
 of the land. No mention is made of human activity as
 contributing to the production of the 'herb'; though
 the land as such is cultivated. From the land and from
 man it is reasonable to look for fruitful use of divine
 gifts. The human ministry of the teacher and the
 tiller falls into the background.

The primal record of Genesis furnishes the ex-
 ample of fruitful fertility (Gen. 1:11) and the ex-
 ample of noxious growth (Gen. 3:18), followed in the
 one case by blessing (1:13), and connected in the other
 with a curse (3:17).¹²¹

Verse 7! "For land which has drunk the rain that
 often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to
 those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing
 from God." *γῆ* here has the meaning of "arable land".¹²²
 Notice the peculiar position of the noun at the beginning
 of the sentence. We might translate, "Take the example of
 land".¹²³ *πιποῦσα* The literal meaning of the verb is
 "to drink". Perhaps in this context the word might better
 be rendered "to suck in, absorb, imbibe".¹²⁴ The use of the
 aorist is rather significant. It seems to point to the fact
 of a complete appropriation of the rain of divine blessing,
 a fact which must precede the actual production of fruit.

¹²¹ Op. cit., p. 152.

¹²² Thayer, op. cit., p. 114.

¹²³ Dods, op. cit., p. 299.

¹²⁴ Thayer, op. cit., p. 510.

Compare also Deut. 11:11. τὸν ἔπ' αὐτῆς ἐρχόμενον
 πολλαίς ὑετῶν "The rain that often comes upon it!" The writer
 conceives of a field upon which the refreshing rains of the
 Lord have fallen with blessed regularity. That is shown
 by the use of the adverb πολλαίς and by the present tense
 of the participle ἐρχόμενον. It is not just occasion-
 ally that God has visited this land with the life giving
 moisture of His goodness. Time and again He has blessed
 it. It is interesting to note that the writer says the
 land has absorbed these rains from heaven. It has drunk
 the water in. The rain has not run off, but it has infil-
 trated the soil. The power and blessing of the rain's in-
 vigorating strength have been experienced by both the land
 which is fruitful, and by the land that is barren. Could
 the writer have reference to that same intimate absorption
 into the life of God which he ascribed in verses 4-6 to
 the apostate Christians before their fall? ἔπ' αὐτῆς "The
 genitive . . . gives not only the idea of reaching to but
 adds also that of extending over. Comp. James 5:17; Mark
 4:26; Apoc. 3:10."¹²⁵

καὶ τίκτουσα βοτάνην ἔσμετον ἐκείνοις δι' οὓς
 καὶ γεωργεῖται "And is continually bearing vegetation
 that is useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated!"

¹²⁵Westcott, op. cit., p. 152.

The force of the present tense in *τίκτουσα* is again significant. This fruitful land does not bring forth sporadic harvests of mature grain. Its productivity is constant.

βοτάνη is the Septuagint translation for the Hebrew *בִּצְיָדָה*, *בִּצְיָדָה*, *בִּצְיָדָה*, and could perhaps be rendered as "growing plant".¹²⁶ This vegetation is described as being

εὐμετόν, that is, "useful" to those for whom it is tilled or cultivated.¹²⁷ There is a degree of uncertainty as to

whether *ἐκείνοις* should be taken with *τίκτουσα* or with the adjective *εὐμετόν*. We are inclined to connect the word with *εὐμετόν*, primarily because of the proximity of the two words. *δι' οὗτος* "For whose sake!" Those meant are undoubtedly the ones who have a legitimate right to expect fruitfulness from the soil--the owners or the tenants. They have given of their time and efforts to cultivate the land; the reasonable response from the soil must be fruit bearing. That thought is perhaps carried in the conjunction

καί. As Dods points out, the *καί* suggests a thought which brings into relief the naturalness of the *τίκτειν*

βοτάνην εὐμετόν ἐκείνοις.¹²⁸ This fruitfulness is a naturally anticipated result. Land that thus responds to the blessed care of its cultivator is blessed by God. The fact of fertility is in itself a guarantee of further

¹²⁶ Thayer, op. cit., p. 104.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 258.

¹²⁸ Luenemann, as quoted by Dods, op. cit., p. 299.

fruitfulness. εὐλογίας "A blessing!" In the context, the word signifies a blessing of "continual fertility of the soil granted by God".¹²⁹ The more the land brings forth, the more God blesses it with increased power to produce. In the wider context of the Scriptures, εὐλογία becomes associated not just with the act of blessing, but also with the state of blessedness into which such an act places one, the blessed state of God's $\square \eta \zeta \omega \iota$. In the religious sense, this blessing of the Lord finds its highest expression in the Messianic redemption of Jesus (Gen. 12:3). Thus to be blessed by God means to have His $\eta \eta \omega \iota$ pronounced upon us, as He beholds us in Christ, and it also implies living in the perpetual state of blessedness that comes as a result of the blessed pronouncement. He who has been blessed by God has been known by God, chosen to be one of God's own, a child of God's house, an heir of God's heaven. To that blessing of the Lord man responds with the worship of faith and faithfulness--faith that flings itself wholly upon the promises of God's grace, faithfulness which surrenders itself unconditionally to the execution of God's will.¹³⁰ μεταλαμβάνει used here with the genitive probably means "is a partaker of".¹³¹ Perhaps the present tense suggests a continual

¹²⁹Thayer, op. cit., p. 260.

¹³⁰Cf. Beyer in Kittel, op. cit., II, 752.

¹³¹Thayer, op. cit., p. 405.

participation in divine blessings. Even as the land continually produces, so is it continually blessed. It must be pointed out that it is the blessing of the Lord which antecedes, establishes, and maintains the soil's fruitfulness. There is no bargain basis between God and the land. It is wholly one-sided. For the blessing of the Lord is always His blessing upon the soil. The blessing is alone from heaven to earth. It is the soil which is prepared, tilled and watered by the Lord. It is His blessing which enables its fertility.

Two main points present themselves. The first is that the test of the soil's utility is measured by its fertility. The second is that productivity by the soil assures the blessing from the Lord of continued fruitfulness. The application is obvious. The test of healthy Christianity is the fruit of faith and faithfulness. For he that abides in Christ "bringeth forth much fruit" (John 15:5). Hearts that drink in the rain of God's love in Christ must produce the vegetation of obedient surrender to the will of the Lord, or they are not hearts alive to God. From hearts so blessed with the abundance of His grace, the Lord has every right to expect a heavy harvest of responsive worship in faith and life.¹³² To hearts that do respond, the Lord pours

¹³²The abundant rains represent the spiritual blessings described in verses 4-5. Cf. Dods, op. cit., p. 299.

down an even greater ability to produce the sweet fruit of godliness. That becomes His blessing upon His faithful followers.

From the land that is blessed the writer now turns his thoughts to the land that is near to the curse.

The judgment on the land, fruitful only for ill, is given in three stages. It is rejected: such land cannot any longer be reckoned as land fruitful for service. It is nigh unto a curse: it presents the outward features of the curse (Gen. 3:17 f), whence the near presence of the curse is inferred. Its end is burning.¹³³

ἔκφρονονσα δὲ ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους ἀδόκιμος! But

if it brings forth thorns and thistles it is worthless."

ἔκφρονονσα is a conditional participle referring back to *γῆ*. The present tense is again significant. Thorns and thistles seem to be the regular crop of this rejected soil.

ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους Undoubtedly a reference to Gen.

3:17-18! It must be noted that the presence of brambles and briars in the text before us comes as a result of the land's failure to be fertile even under the most favorable circumstances of divine blessing. That is not true of Gen. 3:18. For there it is the curse of God that is responsible for the growth of obnoxious weeds. *ἀδόκιμος*

A predicate adjective that agrees with *γῆ*! The root meaning of the word signifies "that which has not stood the test, that which does not prove itself to be such as it

¹³³Westcott, op. cit., p. 153.

ought".¹³⁴ With $\gamma\eta$ it would emphasize the fact of sterility.¹³⁵ " $\alpha\delta\acute{o}\kappa\iota\mu\omicron\varsigma$ is found elsewhere in the New Testament only in St. Paul: e.g. I Cor. 9:27; II Cor. 13:5 ff."¹³⁶ Soil that is $\alpha\delta\acute{o}\kappa\iota\mu\omicron\varsigma$ is soil upon which God has lavished all the necessary preparations for productivity, which, however, despite this fact, has failed to produce the expected harvest of useful fruit. And because it does not produce when it should, the result is that it cannot produce. Even as fruitful soil is blessed with increased fruitfulness, so fruitless soil is cursed with sterility. In this way, the inability to bring forth fruit actually becomes a form of divine rejection upon the unproductive land. "Bringt das Land Frucht, dann emfaengt es Segen von Gott. Bringt es dagegen Dornen und Distlen hervor (Gen. 3:18), dann wird es von Gott verworfen"¹³⁷

$\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\kappa\alpha\tau\acute{\alpha}\gamma\alpha\varsigma$ $\epsilon\gamma\gamma\acute{\upsilon}\varsigma$ "And is near to being cursed!"

$\kappa\alpha\tau\acute{\alpha}\gamma\alpha\varsigma$

. . . is the contrary of a 'blessing'. As a word of blessing spoken in Jehovah's Name expresses (and also conveys) that which proceeds from His gracious favor--health, strength, wisdom, prosperity, success, and all that is comprehended under the word shalom (peace), so a curse expresses (and also conveys) that which proceeds from His wrath--disease, ill-success, ruin,

¹³⁴Thayer, op. cit., p. 12.

¹³⁵Ibid.

¹³⁶Westcott, op. cit., p. 153.

¹³⁷Michel, op. cit., p. 150.

desolation, death.¹³⁸

Deuteronomy chapter 28 is perhaps the outstanding commentary on the Biblical curse. To be cursed of the Lord is to suffer constant misfortune in this life, and to be without His presence eternally in that life which is to come (Matt. 25:41). Soil that is cursed is soil which is permanently abandoned as being hopelessly barren. It is soil that has finally hardened itself (or is hardened) to the life giving rains from heaven. There is no hope for it except by a miraculous act of re-creation on the part of the Lord. It is no longer temporarily fruitless; it is completely dead. That is its curse.

Who is the cause of this curse? The land itself, by its own unproductiveness despite the fact that it has soaked in the rains of God. And since it is God who sends the rain, it is God who pronounces the ultimate judgment of rejection upon this land which refused to respond to His goodness.

ἧς τὸ τέλος εἰς καύσιν "Whose end is to be burned!" It is difficult to determine the antecedent of the relative ἧς. Does it refer to "land" or to "curse"? Westcott has this to say on the construction: "The rhythm of the whole sentence shows that the relative looks back on the main and not to the last antecedent."¹³⁹ τέλος by

¹³⁸A. G. Hebert, in Richardson, op. cit., p. 57.

¹³⁹Op. cit., p. 153.

itself is an "end, termination, limit."¹⁴⁰ In this context it very likely signifies a "fate" or "recompense".¹⁴¹ εἶς here expresses purpose. (Compare also Rom. 10:10; I Cor. 11:17.) καὶ οὖν is the Biblical symbol for God's judgment against sin. (Compare Amos 1-2; Is. 10:17-18; II Pet. 3:10.12; Heb. 10:27.) It is fire which symbolizes the Deus Absconditus (Heb. 12:18-21), the God who hates and kills, the God in whom there is no mercy.

The image here appears to represent utter desolation as of a land destroyed by volcanic forces. Compare Deut. 29:23. The thought of purification by fire, true itself, is foreign to the context; nor does the image of burning of the noxious growth of the land seem to be sufficiently expressive. Compare chapter 10:26 f; John 15:6.¹⁴²

Thayer interprets the phrase as meaning "to be burned by fire and brimstone from heaven".¹⁴³ It would almost seem that the total destruction of the land in addition to that of the thorns and thistles indicates a progression in the writer's thought.

Am Schluss ist das Bild nicht mehr ganz klar: Eigentlich muessten Dornen und Disteln verbrannt werden, aber das Gleichnis verlangt die Vernichtung des Landes. Der Fortschritt des Gleichnisses ueber den Lehrsatz 6:4-6 hinaus liegt in der eschatologischen Wendung: Gott zieht das 'Land' zur Verantwortung. Das Gleichnis ist also nicht nur 'Erlaeuterung', sondern auch selbstaendige Weiterfuehrung des Gedankens: die Gemeinde hat ueber reichen Segen

¹⁴⁰Thayer, op. cit., p. 620.

¹⁴¹Ibid.

¹⁴²Westcott, op. cit., p. 153.

¹⁴³Op. cit., p. 342.

Verantwortung abzulegen.¹⁴⁴

Thus the writer reminds the entire congregation of its responsibility to produce the fruit of faith-filled Christian living or incur the devouring flames of divine wrath on the coming day of reckoning. The point of the parable is to underscore the solemn responsibility that lies with those upon whom God has rained the knowledge of salvation. From them He expects to harvest the fruit of faith that works by love. And it must be there, or the eternal fire will sweep over them.

We have to do here with the mysterious Law of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:10-13). The soil of the human heart must remain fruitless, devoid of any positive response to the Lord, unless the Lord first visits it with His creative power. Eyes that see and ears that hear are always eyes and ears which have been opened by God (Matt. 10:11). For no one comes to Christ except the Father draws him (John 6:44). Men know neither the Father nor the Son except by divine choice and revelation (Matt. 11:27). To be sustained in such a faith is to be *ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ ᾧ προϋποκειμένου* (I Pet. 1:5). The initial act, the confirmation, the consummation--all are of God. The fruitful soil, the understanding eye, the believing heart are solely of divine election and power. On the other hand, a field that fails to produce,

¹⁴⁴Michel, op. cit., p. 150.

eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear become guilty of that divine grace which they spurn, yet which they are powerless to appropriate except by divine action. The confession of faith is from the Lord. The denial of unbelief is from man. And if that denial becomes man's response to God's act of mercy, then any additional shower of divine blessing only helps to confirm the fatal state of sterility that has already set in. Then that very Gospel which God has intended for life becomes an instrument of death. How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out (Rom. 11:33)!

Though this curse of final fruitlessness is imminent, it does not yet rest upon the soil that has brought forth only useless weeds. That is shown by the adverb *εγγύς*. Through repentance, a curse that is near can be changed into a curse that is distant.¹⁴⁵ The word itself can refer to nearness of time or position.¹⁴⁶ Whatever its exact shade of meaning, it preaches a powerful sermon. Viewed as Law, it points up the inevitability of God's coming wrath. Taken as Gospel, it seems to allude to a possible escape from judgment, if an immediate reversal of production is forthcoming. There is yet time. The door of grace is still open. But if thorns and thistles continue, the irrevocable curse, which is even now only a hair's breath away, will most certainly be realized.

¹⁴⁵Ecumenius, in Westcott, op. cit., p. 153.

¹⁴⁶Thayer, op. cit., p. 164.

The Hebrew Christians could hardly mistake the writer's intended application to their own lives. Desperately he pleads for an immediate about face from the sluggishness and listlessness of faith in Christ, which have become an increasingly dangerous characteristic of their Christianity. This condition must be changed, or the *Παράπρεσόντας* which is *ἔγγυς*, the *Κατάστας* which is *ἔγγυς* will become a terrible reality. Regression must become progression, babes in faith must become mature men (5:12). The thorns and thistles of doubt must go. The briars of listlessness must be rooted out. And instead, a faith must be brought forth which conquers kingdoms, enforces justice, receives promises, stops the mouths of lions, quenches raging fires, escapes the edge of the sword, wins strength out of weakness, becomes mighty in war, puts foreign armies to flight, a faith that submits to torture and refuses to accept release, a faith that mocks at scourging and chains and imprisonment, a faith that is ready to face stones and saw and sword, a faith that laughs at destitution and affliction and ill-treatment, a faith that drives into deserts and mountains and dens and caves rather than to deny Christ (11:33-38). Thus the nearness of a curse can be mitigated into the nearness of a blessing, if only the backward look away from Christ changes into the forward look upon Him who is the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith (12:2).

CHAPTER III

THE TEXT IN THE CONTEXT OF SCRIPTURE

Hebrews 6:4-8 sets forth the fatal consequence of forsaking God's redemptive revelation in Christ. At the same time it becomes perhaps the outstanding warning against falling prey to the heinous rejection which it describes. Looked upon in this light, the passage parallels the other countless admonitions of the Lord's Word to be eternally vigilant, lest the lion from hell, in an unguarded moment, devour our sleeping souls. It is with forceful warnings such as the one before us that God pricks and prods us into being ever alert to the temptation of total apostasy, a temptation made greater by persistent spiritual dullness, obstinacy, and a conscious grieving of the Holy Ghost (Ps. 32:9; 78:8; Is. 46:12; 48:4).

These apostates whom the writer pictures are people with fat hearts, and heavy ears, and shut eyes (Is. 6:10). These are they who hate instruction and cast God's words behind them (Ps. 50:17). These are the chaff which the fire devours and the flame consumes, so that "their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel" (Is. 5:24). These are the "stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears who do always resist the Holy Ghost" until He leaves

never to return (Acts 8:51). These are they who link Christ with Beelzebub (Matt. 12:24), who "pass Him by, wagging their heads and reviling Him" (Matt. 27:29). These are they who become guilty of the unpardonable sin against God's Spirit (Matt. 12:31; Mark 3:29; Heb. 10:26; I John 5:16), because they know that Jesus is Lord, yet they refuse to acknowledge His lordship. They are convinced that Jesus is the Light of Life, but they "love darkness rather than light" (John 3:19). These are "His own" to whom He came, but they "received Him not" (John 1:11). These are they who have not laid it to heart to give glory to God's name, and upon whom God will send a curse by turning former joy into sorrow (Mal. 2:2). These are rejectors of Jesus who "will not see life", and upon whom "the wrath of God abides" (John 3:36). For they refused to accept Christ as "I AM"; therefore, they "shall die in their sins" (John 8:24). They were disciples with Him for awhile, but they "went back, and walked with Him no more" (John 6:66). The seed of the Word was once in them, but they let it become choked (Matt. 13:7). These are the faithful who drew back and in whom God no longer takes pleasure (Heb. 10:38; II Pet. 2:20).

The stern teaching of our text is this: "To let go of Christ is to forfeit Life". And that is a theme carried out by nearly every writer of the sacred Scriptures, as we have attempted briefly to show.

CHAPTER IV

THE TEXT IN THE CONTEXT OF HISTORY

Some Patristic Interpretations

The passage was variously interpreted in early times. TERTULLIAN representing the sterner (Montanist) view, held that it declared that all who had fallen away from the faith, either by temporary apostasy or by gross sin, were cut off from it for their whole life, without possibility of readmission on repentance: de Pudic. xx. Hoc qui ab apostolis didicit et cum apostolis docuit, numquam moeicho et fornicatori secundam poenitentiam promissam ab apostolis norat.

In the earliest stage of the Novatianist controversy the words do not seem to have been quoted. Novatian himself does not refer to the epistle.

In the fourth century and onwards however it was pressed by those who held his views¹

This was not, however, a uniform interpretation of the early church. According to Westcott, "this opinion and this use of these words found no favour in the Catholic Church. On the contrary the Catholic writers limited the meaning of the passage to the denial of a second baptism."² Among those who supported such an interpretation were Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Chrysostom.³ And among the Latin fathers:

AMBROSE (de Poenit. ii. 3): De baptisate autem

¹B. F. Westcott, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), pp. 165-6.

²Ibid., p. 166.

³Ibid.

dictum verba ipsa declarant quibus significavit impossibile esse lapsos renovari in poenitentiam, per lavacrum enim renovamur . . . eo spectat ut de baptismo dictum credamus in quo crucifigimus filium Dei in nobis

Possum quidem etiam illud dicere ei qui hoc de poenitentia dictum putat, quia quae impossibilia sunt apud homines possibilia sunt apud Deum

Sed tamen de baptismo dictum, ne quis iteret, vera ratio persuadet.

PRIMASIUS: Quid ergo? exclusa est poenitentia post baptismum et venia delictorum? Absit. Duo siquidem genera sunt poenitentiae, unum quidem ante baptismum, quod et praeparatio baptismi potest appellari . . . alterum autem genus poenitentiae quo post baptismum delentur peccata quam beatus Apostolus minime excludit.⁴

The Church of the Reformation

Luther

One of the reasons why Luther did not regard the Letter to the Hebrews as being canonical was the difficulty he had in reconciling chapter 6:4-8 and chapter 10:26 ff with other Scriptural teaching on the doctrine of repentance. In his preface to the epistle Luther comments:

Again there is a hard knot in the fact that in chapters VI and X it flatly denies and forbids to sinners repentance after Baptism, and in chapter XII, it says that Esau sought repentance and did not find it. This seems, as it stands, to be against all the Gospels and St. Paul's epistles; and although one might make a gloss on it, the words are so clear that I do not know whether that would be sufficient. My opinion is that it is an Epistle of many pieces put together, and it does not deal with any one object in an orderly way.

However that may be, it is a marvellously fine

⁴Ibid.

epistle. It discusses Christ's priesthood masterfully and thoroughly out of the Scriptures, and interprets the Old Testament finely and richly. Thus it is plain that it is the work of an able and learned man, who was a disciple of the Apostles, learned much from them, and was greatly experienced in faith and practical in the Scriptures.⁵

Speaking on the text itself Luther says:

Diesen Text sollst du recht ansehen, so wirst du finden, dass er gar nichts wider uns ist, denn er lehrt: Wenn einer von Christo, so das rechte Opfer fuer die Suende ist, abgefallen ist, und einen andern Weg oder Weise, selig zu werden und gen Himmel zu kommen, er wird nichts ausrichten. Denn wenn wir zu Christo gebracht werden, so sollen wir ihn nicht wieder aus den Augen lassen. Denn so man ihn verliert, und auf eine andere Weise gen Himmel klettert, da ist's unmoeglich, dass einer zu Vergebung der Suenden kommen moege, denn er laeuft aus der Lehre, die uns allein Vergebung der Suenden anbeut. Er redet allhier von der Lehre und nicht von dem Werk, und wir lehren traun auch also; als wenn ich sage: Die Tuerken haben vor Zeiten an Christum geglaubt, aber sie haben sich durch ihren Mahomet davon verfuehren lassen, und sind von der Lehre Christi und Vergebung der Suenden abgefallen, und von Christo auf ihre Werke gewichen: wie denn die Tuerken ein hart, gestreng Leben fuehren, und mehr gute Werke thun, dass unsere Moenche gegen ihnen lauter Suender sind. Darum weil die Tuerken Christum verleugnet und hinter sich geworfen haben, der doch allein der Weg, die Wahrheit und das Leben ist, da ist's unmoeglich dass sie sollten selig werden, denn ohne Christo wird nicht die geringste Suende vergeben. Derhalben folgt in demselbigen Text zun Hebraeern bald auf drauf, dass sie fuerder kein Opfer fuer die Suende haben wuerden, sondern das hoellische Feuer bekommen sollten.

So sollen wir nun bei dem HErrn Christo bleiben, wenn wir gesuendigt haben, und ihm nicht den Ruecken zukehren, sonst verlieren wir die Vergebung der Suende.⁶

⁵Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle to the Hebrews," The Works of Martin Luther, Holman Edition (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1932), VI, 476-7.

⁶Martin Luther, "Luthers Predigt ueber Matth. 18, 21.22," Luthers Saemmtliche Schriften, edited by Dr. Joh. Georg Walch (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1891), VII, 959.

Luther also makes this brief remark on the passage in an article from his Schriften von den Klostersgeluebden entitled Von den Wittwen bei Paulus (I Tim. 5:11.12):

Deshalb schliessen wir: der erste Glaube sei der christliche Glaube, von dem viele in der ersten Kirche abfielen, als er noch neu war. Und diesen Abfall strafte die Apostel auf's schaeerfste und auch der Verfasser des Hebraeer greift ihn heftig an, indem er (Cap. 6:4-6) behauptet, dass es unmoeglich sei, dass diejenigen, welche einmal abgefallen sind, wiederum erneuert werden zur Seligkeit, naemlich weil die, welche abfielen, in der Meinung standen, dass sie auch durch einen anderen Glauben, und zwar in ihrem eigenen oder dem juedischen, selig werden koennten.⁷

In his Hebraeerbrief Vorlesung, Luther takes the stand that Hebrews 6:4-8 must refer to a total apostasy from Christ, and cannot mean especially severe falls into mortal sin. Otherwise, he argues, it would have been impossible for such men as Peter and David to be reinstated in grace after their lapses of faith.⁸

Calvin

This passage has given occasion to many to repudiate this Epistle, especially as the Novatians armed themselves with it to deny pardon to the fallen But when the design of the Apostle is understood, it then appears evident that there is nothing here which countenances so delirious an error. Some who hold sacred the authority of the Epistle, while they attempt to dissipate this absurdity, yet do nothing but evade it. For some take 'impossible' in the sense of rare or difficult, which is wholly different from its meaning. Many confine it

⁷Saemmtliche Schriften, XIX, 1661-2.

⁸Martin Luther, "Hebraeerbrief Vorlesung von 1517/18," Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte, edited by Emanuel Hirsch and Hans Lietzmann, and translated by Erich Vogelsang (Berlin and Leipzig: Verlag von Walter Gruyter & Co., 1930), XVII, 95-97.

to that repentance by which the catechumens in the ancient Church were wont to be prepared for baptism, as though indeed the Apostles prescribed fasting, or such things to the baptized. And then what great thing would the Apostle have said, by denying that repentance, the appendage of baptism, could be repeated? He threatens with the severest vengeance of God all those who would cast away the grace which had been once received;

The knot of the question is in the word fall away. Whoever then understands its meaning, can easily extricate himself from every difficulty. But it must be noticed that there is a twofold falling away, one particular, and the other general. He who has in anything, or in any way offended, has fallen away from his state as a Christian; therefore all sins are so many fallings. 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 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 now see whom he excluded from the hope of pardon, even the apostates who alienated themselves from the Gospel of Christ, which they had previously embraced, and from the grace of God; and this happens to no one but to him who sins against the Spirit

If anyone asks why the Apostle makes mention here of such apostasy while he is addressing believers, who were far off from a perfidy so heinous; to this I answer, that the danger was pointed out by him in time, that they might be on their guard. And this ought to be observed; for when we turn aside from the right way, we not only excuse to others 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 Therefore the Apostle does not without reason forwarn all the disciples of Christ to beware in time. For a continued torpor

commonly ends in lethargy, which is followed by alienation of mind

But here arises a new question. How can it be that he who has once made such a progress should afterwards fall away? For God, it may be said, calls none effectually but the elect, and Paul testifies that they are really his sons who are led by his Spirit, (Rom. viii. 14;) and he teaches us, that it is a sure pledge of adoption when Christ makes us partakers of his Spirit. 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. To all this I answer that God indeed favors none but the elect alone with the Spirit of regeneration, and that by this they are distinguished from the reprobate; But I cannot admit that 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 iv. 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.

And by this bridle the Lord keeps us in fear and humility; and we certainly see how prone human nature is otherwise to security and foolish confidence. At the same time our solicitude ought to be such as not to disturb the peace of conscience. For the Lord strengthens faith in us, while he subdues our flesh

In short, the Apostle warns us, that repentance is not at the will of man, but that it is given by God to those only who have not wholly fallen away from faith. It is a warning very necessary to us, lest by often delaying until to-morrow, we should alienate ourselves more and more from God As then the Lord promises pardon to none but to those who repent of their iniquity, it is no wonder that they perish who either through despair or contempt, rush on in their obstinacy into destruction. But when one arises up again after falling, we may hence conclude that he had not been guilty of defection, however grievously

he may have sinned.⁹

Thus it is only by laying the blame for reprobation in the hand of God that Calvin solves the problem of our text. Apostates were never intended by the Lord to remain in the faith. The Spirit's call to them was not totally serious, but only a temporary invitation. For men bound for heaven cannot become lost.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

We shall let our Synod speak through the lips of one of her strongest exegetes, Doctor George Stoeckhardt. The following excerpt is taken from an article by Doctor Stoeckhardt entitled The Sacerdotal Office of Christ According to the Epistle to the Hebrews.

It is indeed significant that the Epistle which presents the loftiest comfort of our most holy faith also contains the most incisive warnings against unbelief. In language which cuts to the quick the writer describes the catastrophic end, the final terrible consequence of unbelief and apostasy, 6:4-8. He speaks of such as were at one time true, believing Christians, have known and felt the truth of God's Word, were enlightened by the Holy Ghost, have tasted of the good Word of God, were made partakers of the Spirit of grace, had experienced in their heart the joy of redemption so beautifully described in this Epistle for the comfort of Christians. In short, they have had a foretaste of the future glory and from personal experience knew that what they had learned from the Word of God is divine truth.

⁹John Calvin, "Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews," Calvin's Commentaries on the New Testament, translated by John Owen (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), XVIII, 135-141.

And concerning such the writer states the possibility of parapesontas, 6:6, they may apostatize. This means that they deny everything which they have experienced in their heart; they willfully again serve sin, though they know and have experienced the deadly poison of sin and, on the other hand, the blissful condition of those whose sins are forgiven. They tread under foot, i.e., treat with utmost contempt, the Son of God, count the blood of the covenant an unholy thing, that blood by which they have been sanctified and have received the forgiveness of their sins. The doctrine of redemption, once the joy and comfort of their heart, has become unto them a common and an unholy thing. They despise with their whole heart what once they had known as saving truth, 10:26-31. In addition they despise the Spirit of grace and declare that His witness in their hearts had only been a self-delusion. Yes, they may even say that they have deceived themselves and others with their Christianity. This is apostasy in its final form. The Apostle is not describing every kind of falling away, for though a Christian may fall into mortal sins which destroy faith, he may repent and be received again. But he who sins willfully after he has received knowledge, 10:26, has reached the final stage of apostasy. Luther often calls this wilfull sinning after having tasted God's grace the 'sin against the Holy Ghost.' This wilfull sinning is not what we are wont to call mortal sin, it is something more fearful, namely, an eventual hardening in unbelief.

It is impossible that they who are guilty of this apostasy be renewed unto repentance because they crucified to themselves the Son of God afresh, 6:6. The Jews and their leaders and the heathen crucified Christ in ignorance. But it is far different when they who have come to know salvation in Christ, by their apostasy crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh. With all the powers of their will they reject the Son of God and everything that reminds them of His work of redemption. Rather than to be partakers of the forgiveness of sins, they want to perish in their sins. In this state repentance is impossible. But their repentance is impossible for another reason. Such people harden themselves and have, as it were, ruined their heart and conscience to such an extent that it is like unfruitful ground which yields only thorns and briers. Therefore God delivers them unto a curse and to utter destruction, 6:8. They have no more offering for sin, having trodden under foot the great Offering of the New Testament. If death was the punishment for the transgression of the

Law of Moses, how much greater will be the punishment of him who has disdained the merit of Christ and trodden it under foot? 10:27-29. Such an one will and must experience the solemn truth of the Lord's word: 'Vengeance belongeth unto Me,' 10:30.

The characterization and dreadful outcome of apostasy is recorded as a most earnest warning. The holy writer does not say that the Hebrew Christians had already reached this state, but he points to the ultimate end if anyone refuses to be warned. But such warnings are necessary for the Old Adam in the Christian, who is constantly inclined to apostasy; he must be told that there is a falling away from which it is impossible to rise again.¹⁰

Walther likewise regards Heb. 6:4-8 as a description of the sin against the Holy Ghost. Commenting briefly upon the passage in thesis XXIV of his Law and Gospel he says:

It is characteristic of the sin against the Holy Ghost that the person who has committed it cannot be restored to repentance. That is simply impossible. It is not God who puts man into this condition, but the sinner by his own fault produces this state of irretrievable impenitence. When this condition has reached a certain degree, God ceases to operate on the person. The curse has settled upon him, and there is no further possibility for the person to be saved. Why? Because he cannot be induced to repent. The soil of his heart has been finally blasted and is no longer fructified by the dew and rain of divine grace.¹¹

¹⁰George Stoeckhardt, "The Sacerdotal Office of Christ According to the Epistle to the Hebrews," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXI (August, 1950), 572-574.

¹¹C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, reproduced from the German edition of 1897 by W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n.d.), p. 396.

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