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A Study of Hebrews 6:4-8

By HERBERT H. HOHENSTEIN

(Concluded)

THE close relationship between "tasting the good Word of God" and "the powers of the age to come" is quite evident. The reason is, perhaps, as Davidson maintains, that the consummate blessings of these powers lie in the future. Therefore, by necessity, they must be "combined with the good word of promise."¹¹ That is undoubtedly true. In addition, one might say 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. Cf. Rom. 1:16.

Before entering upon an interpretation of the actual apostasy of the Christians here considered, let us pause to summarize the ground just covered. Each of the four experiences painted by the writer to describe the Christian life has a certain "once-for-allness" about it. The use of both the adverb *ἅπαξ* and the aorist tense of the participles seem to indicate that the rebirth from death to life should happen just once. In addition, the Christian life here presented possesses an intensely experienced absorption into the reality of the blessings which faith in Christ brings. These people had tasted richly of the eternal manna, had drunk deeply from the river of God's pleasures. The author's description has been of those who not only have professed the Christian faith, but also have 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, *παραπεσόντας*, "and have fallen away." The literal meaning of *παραπίπτω* is "to fall beside a person or thing; to slip aside"; hence the derived meaning "to deviate from the right path, to turn aside, to wander." It is a *hapax* in the NT. In the Septuagint it is used as a translation for the Hebrew verb *לָצַד*, which suggests the idea of falling away from trust in, and worship of, the Lord (Ezek. 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27). The verb seems interchangeable with *ἀποστῆναι* (2 Chron. 26:18; 28:19; 29:6; 30:7). Compare also chapter 3:12, where the writer warns against

"departing (ἀποστῆναι) from the living God" with "an evil heart of unbelief." Speaking on the word Michel (p. 149) points out: "Die Gemeinde scheint dies Wort auch ohne nähere Erläuterung als 'Abfall' verstanden zu haben; gemeint ist nicht jede beliebige schwere Sünde, sondern der Bruch mit der Vergangenheit, die Preisgabe der christlichen Wahrheit."

Although the context seems to indicate a final and fatal apostasy from the faith, it must be remembered, however, that παραλίπω by itself does not have this special meaning. If this is the case, what justification do we have for regarding this fall as an irrevocable apostasy? Two reasons, I believe! The first is found in the purpose of the letter. The writer's goal was to set forth the absolute and incomparable sufficiency and superiority of the Christian faith, while at the same time he constantly warned against a fatal repudiation of that faith. His concern was not primarily with sins as such, but with the one great sin of unbelief. When we look at παραπεσόντας in such a context, it seems reasonable to assume that the word describes an experience similar to those pictured in 3:12, 10:26, and 10:29. All three of these passages refer to that fatal break with Christ which the writer is trying so desperately to prevent.

The following fact also deserves consideration. If Heb. 6:4-6 presents a description of those who have become guilty only of some especially great sin, and not the sin against the Spirit, then the impossibility of a second repentance which is predicated to them would seem to be a direct contradiction of both the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul. 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 composed 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. Yet from the Scriptural accounts we assume that this was not the case.

Davidson (p. 122) remarks: "*Falling away* does not mean falling into sin, even grievous sin, but renouncing the faith of Christ wholly. It is called 'sinning willfully,' that is, apostatizing against experience and better knowledge, in 10:26, where the history and

experience described in verses 4, 5 is called 'receiving the knowledge of the truth.'"

Πάλιν! That which the writer claims as ἀδύνατον is the πάλιν, the againness, of repentance. The foundation has been laid; it will not be laid again (6:1 f.). Repetition is the mark of the old covenant; finality, once-for-allness, the sign of the new. On this point, cf. the use of ἀπαξ and ἐφάπαξ in the epistle.

Ἀνακαινίζειν! The word occurs only here in the New Testament. The LXX uses it in Lam. 5:21, in which the prophet requests the Lord to "renew our days as of old." Compare also Psalm 39:2 and 103:5. For whom is this restoration to repentance impossible? Does the writer have in mind both the church and the church's Lord? If so, then even God's limitless power to save has been frustrated in the case of these apostates. That God has bound me to the means of grace is beyond dispute. But to limit the almighty God to such means in an absolute and unconditional way seems a rather presumptuous attempt 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."¹² Rebirth requires an act ἄνωθεν, "from above." It is a miracle. 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 to the death of unbelief, there is no hope that the quick and powerful Word, heralded by the church, will resurrect them from their gloomy grave of spiritual darkness. God, with His unbounded power, and using resources other than those at the disposal of His church, *might* bring them forth again as His sons. Yet there is no guarantee that He will. In fact, there is more of a guarantee that He will not. For if Heb. 6:4-8 is taken as another description of the sin against the Spirit, then it must be admitted that these apostates, together with the blasphemers in Matt. 12:31, 32, have become guilty of a sin which will not be pardoned either in this age or the age to come.

Ἀνακαινίζειν is a present infinitive, suggesting, perhaps, a continued and persistent effort on the part of the church to restore

to repentance 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. And that is the way it should be. For although *God's* patience may have come to an end, we can never know it. Therefore the church must never cease its warnings and woosings even in the case of the most indifferent apostates.

Some have seen in ἀνακαινίζειν a reference to holy Baptism. According to Farrar (pp. 382, 383), the early church fathers regarded the word to signify a second Baptism. φωτισθέντας would then indicate that Baptism of repentance which is the foundation experience of the Christian life, while ἀνακαινίζειν would refer to the identical act performed after a serious lapse of faith.

Εἰς μετάνοιαν! Repentance becomes the goal and purpose of renewal. 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.

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 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 re-orientation 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.¹³

The prophetic cry for repentance emphasized the need for "rent hearts" rather than "rent garments," for the sacrifice of clean hearts rather than the burnt offerings of lambs and bulls. Compare, for example, Is. 58:5-7. The prophets certainly underscored the fact that repentance involves a radical reversal in all life's domains. There is present a personal conception of sin as a direct revolt against God (Hosea 1—3; Is. 1:2; Jer. 1:16). Repentance therefore assumes the form of a personal return to the Lord (Amos 4:6ff.). 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), a turning away from all evil (Jer. 18:8; Ezek. 3:19; 33:11). Psalm 51 is an

example par excellence of the whole Old Testament idea of repentance. Perhaps one of the outstanding characteristics of the repentance which David desires in this psalm is the fact that God alone must create his turning. Repentance is never a self-achievement. It is always God's gift.

In the New Testament, repentance is a *sine qua non* for entrance into God's kingdom. Cf. Mark 1:15; Matt. 4:17; 21:32. That is certainly understandable when one recalls that the Christ in whom God's scepter wields its royal rule can live in our hearts only after self-crucifixion (Gal. 5:24). In addition to this close relationship between μετάνοια and the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ, there is also in the New Testament a strong tie between repentance and faith. The Lord begins His Galilean ministry with the admonition "Repent and believe" (Mark 1:15). That same connection is carried over into the earliest Apostolic *kerygma* (Acts 2:38).

Not only basic is repentance for entrance into God's kingdom, but also indispensable for continued living in that kingdom. We must remember that the man who claimed to be crucified with Christ (Gal. 5:24) was identical with the man who did the evil he willed not rather than the good he willed (Rom. 7:19). For such a man, repentance becomes a lifelong process.

The writer now proceeds to give 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 hurt) the Son of God and constantly hold Him up to open shame!" According to Michel (p. 149), ἀνασταυροῦν "heisst eigentlich nur kreuzigen . . . doch wird das Verbum von den Kirchenvätern verstärkt wiedergegeben (*aufs Neue kreuzigen*) Vulg.: *tursum crucifigentes*; . . ." Westcott (p. 151) adds the note that in classical Greek ἀνασταυροῦν contains the idea of a crucifixion with the additional notion of exposure. Note that both participles are present. This is a *continuous* crucifixion and shaming of the Christ. Catch the dreadful irony present in the word ἑαυτοῖς. Not the crucified, but the crucifiers suffer. In their violent attempt to ridicule Christ and respike Him to the cross these apostates commit spiritual suicide. On the use of ἑαυτοῖς as the dative of disadvantage compare Rom. 13:2; Matt. 23:31; Gal. 6:14.

The writer does not elaborate on this crucifixion of God's Son. (Note, in passing, the term τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ. The heinousness of the sin is thereby augmented.) The question arises: How is this crucifixion related to the crucifixion of Jesus by the Jews?

Though the death of God's Son on Golgotha has been written on the pages of history, the implications of that event are still alive and active in each generation of men. Through the medium of faith, or lack of it, men transcend the boundaries of space and time and still stand before the Crucified. To that cross men may react in one of two ways. Either they will confess Ἰησοῦς κύριος or say Ἰησοῦς ἀνάθεμα. The first is faith, the second unbelief. And even as the believer benefits from the blessings bestowed in 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. In this sense an unbeliever, a fallen Christian, can be said to "recrucify the Son of God." To recrucify Christ is to deny His claim as God's Messiah sent from above to reveal God and to rescue men from this present, perishable creation to that new world which knows no slavery to pain and death. To recrucify Christ is to say "No!" to the "Yes!" of God's Son. It is to attempt to enter life by another door, another way, another truth, apart from Christ. It is the futile effort to find salvation in a name other than Jesus.

Παραδειγματίζοντας! There seems to be a progression in the writer's thought. Not only do these apostates recrucify Christ, but they also "hold Him up to open shame." The verb contains the idea of showing forth as a public example in a bad sense. It is a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament. However, δειγματίζειν is employed Matt. 1:19 in connection with Joseph's resolve to keep his pregnant fiancée out of the public eye, lest he cause her open disgrace. The verb does occur in the Septuagint in Num. 25:4; Jer. 13:22; Ezek. 28:17; Dan. 2:5. Dods remarks that in the Numbers passages the word "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."¹⁴

It is impossible for men who were once Christians to sink any lower than this. Not only do they inwardly reject Christ (perhaps

this act of recrucifixion was an apostasy primarily of the heart), but they also openly despise Him and publicly contemn His name. These fallen men leave no doubt in the minds of their families and friends as to their opinion of this pseudo-Christ. These apostates become the apostolic version of those Jews of a generation before who slapped the cheek of Jesus, spit in His face, and mocked Him as a false prophet and a fake king. And for them nothing now 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 despite the fact that they did. They had light, but they loved darkness. They tasted the sweetness of God's salvation, but they spit it out again. They fell from life at its fullest to death at its deepest. That was their tragedy.

There are in the Old Testament definite admonitions which pave the way for the warning expressed in the passage before us. In Ezek. 18:21ff. the prophet differentiates between a conversion of the wicked unto righteousness and of the righteous unto wickedness. If the wicked turns from his sins and practices justice and righteousness, he shall live. But if the righteous man turns from his ways and does evil, *he shall die in his sins* (v. 24).

The Jewish Rabbinate submits five different cases in which repentance is declared to be impossible: (1) the person who sins carelessly, trusting in a second repentance; (2) the person who knows God's power but nevertheless rebels against it; (3) the 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; (4) the person who is completely drowned in his sins; (5) the person who leads the multitude into sin. Cf. Michel, p. 151.

Is it possible to mistake certain grievous sins for this final, fatal repudiation of Christ? Speaking to this question Bruce (p.211) remarks: ". . . 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)." It is according to the divine will and pattern that growth in faith

comes gradually, as the temper of trust is purified in the furnace of affliction. The mature "corn" of saintly surrender to the Lord develops only after difficult days in the green immaturity of many soul struggles and many hard setbacks.

The following points will summarize the position at which we have arrived with regard to verses 4-6:

1. These Christians who have "fallen away" had not just nibbled at the Bread of Life; they had feasted heavily upon its goodness.

2. This "falling away" refers to a complete repudiation of the Christian faith (3:12; 10:26; and 10:29 are parallels).

3. The restoration from unbelief to repentance is impossible only for the church and not for the church's Lord. This is true because God has bound men to the means of grace, while He Himself, with His unlimited power, *could*, if He so willed, rise above these means and achieve a successful second conversion.

4. If we regard this passage as another reference to the sin against the Spirit, and if we take seriously such passages, as Rom. 10:14-17, in which Paul tells us that faith comes only through the church's preaching, we must conclude that not even God's boundless power will be brought to bear upon these apostates in an immediate and "supra-means of grace" manner.

5. The reason why repentance is impossible in the case of these apostates is clearly stated. They have rejected Christ, the only Door and Way to the Father.

Is the apostasy here described the same as the sin against the Holy Ghost? The following arguments seem to point to this view:

1. Looking at Heb. 6:4-6 and the three Gospel accounts (Matt. 12:31, 32; Mark 3:22-30; Luke 12:10) which describe the sin against the Spirit, we discover that a violent rejection of Christ is involved in both cases. One might say that the hatred of the Jews in labeling Christ as in league with Beelzebub is identical with the contempt of those who "recrucify Him and hold Him up to public shame." It is the *hatred* of the former which moves Christ to utter those fearful words about the sin that cannot be forgiven. It is the *contempt* of the latter which prevents the restoration to a second repentance. And without repentance and remission of sins there is no entrance into God's kingdom.

2. Although Christ in Matt. 12:32 declares that the person who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, Paul, in 1 Cor. 12:3, makes it unmistakably clear that no one speaking ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ calls Jesus accursed. That is precisely what these apostates have done. Perhaps we are assuming too much for the verb παραδειγματίζω, but it seems impossible to "hold the Son of God up to public shame" without thereby saying Ἰησοῦς ἀνάθεμα. And such a statement indicates that the Spirit has departed. It should be remembered that the Spirit's work is to testify of Christ. To reject that testimony by cursing Christ instead of calling Him Lord is to reject the Father, who sent the Son; the Son, who bears witness to the Father; and the Holy Comforter, who reveals the Father to men in the Son. The sin against the Holy Ghost involves a rejection of the Holy Trinity.¹⁵

Once again let us summarize:

1. It is possible for Christians to fall irrevocably.
2. 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 such an apostasy lies wholly in the wicked will of the apostates.
3. Though the Scriptures expressly ascribe hardness of heart to human perverseness (Matt. 23:3), they also speak of the God who hardens (Gen. 10:1). Following Scriptural data, we conclude that this process of divine hardening is no pretemporal and inflexible 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. This is not said in an attempt to penetrate the mystery surrounding the God who "has mercy on whom He will have mercy and whom He will He hardeneth" (Rom. 9:18), yet who still "will have all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4).
4. The Lord always reserves the right and possesses the power to restore even the greatest apostate to a life of repentance if that be His will. Such an act would be a second conversion and is possible only to the Lord.

In vv. 7 and 8 the writer uses an example from nature to underscore the certainty of condemnation which will be the fate of those who have received into the soil of their souls the enlivening showers

of salvation yet have remained barren of the fruits of faith and love. On the other hand those who have brought forth that fruit will be blessed with a greater yield. For the fact of fertility is in itself a guarantee of further fruitfulness. One might say that the abundant rains mentioned in these verses represent the spiritual blessings described in vv. 4 and 5. Cf. Dods, p. 299. The naturally anticipated result is the fruit of faith and faithfulness. If such fruit is not found, the land is rejected, is no longer reckoned as land fruitful for service, and is near to the fiery curse. Thus the point of the parable is to underscore the solemn responsibility that lies with those upon whom the Lord has rained down His Word of life. From them He expects to harvest the fruit of a 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, empty of any positive response to the Lord, unless He first visits it with His lively power. Eyes that see, ears that hear, are always eyes and ears which have been opened by God (Matt. 10:11). 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). For one to be sustained in faith is to be among the ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ φρουρουμένους (1 Peter 1:5). The initial act, the confirmation, the consummation—all are of God. The fruitful soil, the understanding eye, and the believing heart are solely the result of divine election and intervention. On the other hand, a field that fails to produce, eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear, become guilty of spurning a gift 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 in Christ, then any additional shower of divine blessing only serves to confirm the sterility of a heart already barren of the fruit of faith. Then that very good news 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)!

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 uncertainty that had eaten into the fiber of their faith. 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, submits to torture and refuses to accept release, mocks at scourging and chains and imprisonment, is ready to face stoning and saw and sword, laughs at destitution and affliction and ill-treatment, drives into deserts and mountains and dens and caves rather than to deny Christ (11:33-38). Thus the nearness of "falling away" and the curse of fire which it brings can be mitigated into the advent of a blessing if only the backward look away from Christ becomes the forward look upon Him who is faith's Pioneer and Perfecter (12:2).

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FOOTNOTES

11. A. B. Davidson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1950), p. 121.
12. W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), p. 809.
13. Alan Richardson in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1952), p. 191.
14. Marcus Dods, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1908), IV, 229.
15. Walther regarded Heb. 6:4-6 as a reference to the sin against the Spirit. Cf. his *Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), p. 396. For the opposite view compare Farrar, p. 288.