

LEROY FORLINES LECTURES
AT FREE WILL BAPTIST BIBLE COLLEGE
November 19-22, 2002
By Dr. Robert Picirilli
“Calvinism, Arminianism, and the Theology of Salvation”

LECTURE FOUR: THE POSSIBILITY OF APOSTASY

This final lecture deals with the doctrine of perseverance and the possibility of apostasy. As has been true all week, I can't possibly touch on all the issues that I have treated in *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, so I have had to decide what part might be most helpful for this time. Each of the major parts includes three chapters: one to present the Calvinist's view, one to present the Arminian's view—both of these from a systematic theology perspective—and a third to treat some Biblical theology related to the issue.

For this lecture I decided to focus on the Biblical theology treatment, which I may simplistically define as the attempt to develop theology from Biblical exegesis. I will treat Hebrews 6:4-6, and its context in the entire book of Hebrews, as a means of drawing out Hebrews' own teaching about the possibility of apostasy.

The Context for the Passage

These verses come in the midst of a book that has perseverance for its major theme. The original readers were apparently considering defection from Christ, and the writer wrote to exhort them to persevere in the faith.

While the *doctrinal* passion of Hebrews is Christological, its *hortatory* concern is perseverance. The structure of the book is such that an exhortation to persevere is at the heart of every major section. Hebrews is typically subdivided into four or five major sections, with the first generally agreed to be chapters 1 and 2. The first warning passage is 2:1-4, which includes, (literally) “It is necessary for us to be holding on all the more exceedingly to the things heard, lest haply we drift away (from them)” (2:1).

The second section is clearly chapters 3 and 4, with the second warning passage at the heart of it in 3:7-4:2. There we read, (literally) “Be on watch, brothers, lest haply there will be in anyone of you a wicked, unbelieving heart in departing from the living God” (3:12). “Departing” is the Greek root *apostenai* that our word “apostasy” comes from.

The third and central section is chapters 5-7, at the heart of which is the third warning passage 5:11-6:20. This includes 6:4-6, and I'll return to it.

The final section is chapters 8-12, which include the fourth and fifth warning passages, 10:10-39 and chapter 12. We are warned that, if we decide to take back up our sinful ways, thus trampling under foot Christ's blood and doing insult to the Spirit, our punishment will be much worse than death without mercy under the Mosaic economy. The writer cites the favorite O.T. text for justification by faith, "The just shall live by faith," and then adds: "but if he—that is, the justified one—draws back, my soul has no pleasure in him" (10:26-38). The writer exhorts "lest anyone fall back from the grace of God" (12:15).

Then 6:4-6 is at the heart of a book that has the danger of apostasy at its very roots. The five warning passages tie the whole together and warn the audience against apostasy from Christ. There is no sacrifice for sins, no provision for righteousness, outside Him. Indeed, each of the five warning passages is clarified by the others. All five describe the same sin, include the same warning, and exhort the same audience.

The Text

Here is my own more or less literal translation, arranged to make clear the relationship of the clauses:

- For it is impossible for those
 - who were once-for-all enlightened
 - and who tasted of the heavenly free gift
 - and who became partakers of the Holy Spirit
 - and who tasted God's good word and the powers of the coming age
 - and who fell away
- to be being renewed again unto repentance,
- they crucifying again to/for themselves the Son of God and exposing (Him) to public shame.

There are three key questions about the meaning of this text.

1. Does the passage describe genuine Christians? Some interpreters suggest that something less than genuine conversion is meant. The people described are said to have experienced four *positive* things.

- *They were once-for-all enlightened*: the spiritual enlightenment we associate with salvation.
- *They tasted of the heavenly free gift*. Some suggest that "taste" implies a partial rather than full experience. But Heb. 2:9 uses the very same word to say that Jesus "tasted" death for every person!
- *They became partakers of the Holy Spirit*. (The same word, "partakers," occurs in 3:1, 14 and 12:8, all identifying such "partakers" as true Christians, as having the Holy Spirit in common with other believers. Note Acts 2:38,39 and Gal. 3:14.
- *They tasted God's good word and the powers of the coming age*. They have experienced the goodness that God has spoken of and the supernatural works associated with the age to come—including regeneration and the gift of the Spirit.

One would be hard put to find a better description of genuine regeneration and conversion. Either clause will stand by itself, and the four together provide one of the finest statements about the experience of salvation that appears anywhere in the Scriptures.

2. Does the passage describe real apostasy from salvation?

The answer is in the clause which the Authorized Version renders, "if they shall fall away," meaning a defection from the experience described in the four positive clauses that precede. That is what apostasy means. In light of the contents of the entire book of Hebrews, the "falling away" is synonymous with "drifting away" (2:1), "departing from [literally, apostatizing from] the living God" (3:12), "drawing back" (10:38), and "turning away from the One from heaven" (12:25).

Some interpreters, perhaps unfamiliar with the Greek original, misunderstand the relationship of the clauses. They readily acknowledge that the four positive clauses describe a truly regenerate state. Then they add that *if* such regenerate persons should fall away, they would be apostate. But they insist that this is a hypothetical addition, that the truly regenerate *cannot* really "fall away."

The grammar of the original will not permit this reading. The fifth clause cannot be made a merely hypothetical attachment to an otherwise real set of circumstances. The literal translation I gave earlier shows this in English. In Greek the grammar is equally clear. We have *five equal, coordinate, aorist-tense participles* in a series. Whoever they may be, the persons are described by all five clauses equally: they were (1) enlightened, (2) experienced the gift, (3) became partakers, (4) experienced God's good word, and (5) fell away.

Homer Kent, who does not believe in the possibility of apostasy, recognizes this: "Grammatically there is no warrant for treating the last [participle] in the series any differently from the others." Note the clear NASB translation: "In the case of those who have once been enlightened . . . and have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance."

3. What is the nature of the impossibility referred to?

Those who have experienced the five things listed cannot be renewed to repentance: "impossible" is moved up to the front of the whole sentence for emphasis.

What is impossible? "Renewal to repentance," which makes clear that they had repented earlier. Now that the falling away has taken place, repentance from that apostate state is not possible. Compare 12:15-17, where the illustration of Esau indicates that "a place (opportunity) of repentance was not found."

Why is repentance not possible? The explanation is, "seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." The translators supplied "seeing"; the literal words are, "(they) re-crucifying to (or, for) themselves the Son of God and exposing (Him) to public shame." A few interpreters argue that this is not a *reason* at all. Instead of the King James' use of "seeing" to indicate cause, they would translate "It is impossible to renew them again to repentance *so long as* they are crucifying . . . and publicly shaming Him."

But the clause does not fit well as a temporal clause; interpreters and translators alike are nearly unanimous in rendering it, “It is impossible . . . *because* (“seeing”) they are re-crucifying Him.”

For another thing, the emphasis on the *impossible*, as noted above, makes more sense if this is a real impossibility.

Shank’s interpretation—*so long as*—winds up saying that it is impossible to renew them to repentance so long as they persist in their attitude of rejection. But this almost amounts to saying that it is impossible to bring such a person to repentance so long as he persists in an attitude that makes it impossible to bring him to repentance!

Furthermore, one must do justice to vv. 7,8. The impossibility lies not merely in the attitude of the apostate but also in the judgment of God.

Finally, one should again compare the other warning passages, which also suggest finality. Thus 2:1-4 asks how we shall escape if we “drift away.” The passage beginning at 3:7 reminds us that God swore that the apostate Israelites would not enter the promised rest. In 12:25, again, the warning is that we will not escape if we turn away from Him. Especially does 10:26-39 shed light on this: God will take no pleasure in the one who draws back (v.38). The true reason for the impossibility is that for the apostate there “remains no more sacrifice for sins.” Christ’s blood is the only atonement for sin. Having experienced and rejected that, the apostate has nowhere else to turn.

Other Readings of the Text

Briefly, most Calvinists deal with these passages in one of two ways. (1) Some say that these people were not truly saved and thus the warning isn’t really against apostasy. (2) Others say that the warning is merely hypothetical and does not mean that they can actually fall away. I have referred to both of these approaches above. What interests and amuses me most is that the Calvinists themselves will provide you with all the ammunition you need for either view. Those who believe this is hypothetical provide excellent arguments that the people described were truly saved. And those who believe that they weren’t truly saved will provide excellent arguments why the passage can’t possibly be hypothetical.

I find it very interesting that many Calvinists take note of this passage and other warnings against apostasy given to Christians in the New Testament. Some of them go so far as to say that these warnings are given for the very purpose of helping Christians avoid the temptation to spiritual lapses, that the warnings therefore serve a good purpose in assisting Christians to persevere in the faith. But then they turn right around and say that the apostasy warned against isn’t really possible, after all. When we’ve told people that apostasy isn’t possible, what possible good can the warnings have?

Conclusion

It seems clear that Heb. 6:4-6 and the larger book of which it is part teach the very real possibility of apostasy. I haven't taken time to treat the little letter called 2 Peter, but you'll find that it also has clear teachings along these lines. I want to add a few, brief observations.

- This does *not* mean saved by faith and kept by works. Salvation by faith is ***always*** by faith.
- Our doctrine should not rob us or others of assurance of salvation. Assurance is based on the fact that saving faith establishes saving union with Christ, and by that union His righteousness is imputed to us.
- At the same time, we must not give false assurance. The Scriptures describe the behavior and conduct of a true believer. The Bible doesn't give much assurance to people living in sin.
- On the negative side, we should warn believers against apostasy, especially about the roads that can ultimately lead to apostasy, including: tampering with sin, rebellion against chastisement, and false doctrine.
- On the positive side we should exhort and encourage one another toward spiritual development and growth. This is the surest way to avoid apostasy. 2 Peter concludes: "Beloved, beware lest you fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."
- In the body of Christ we have important responsibilities not just for ourselves but for one another. Hebrews, for example, calls on readers to assist each other by mutual exhortation on their pilgrimage journey: see 3:13; 10:24f; 12:12f; 13:17. These reminders occur right alongside the warnings against apostasy.

Note: Copies of Dr. Robert Picirilli's book, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, may be ordered at www.randallhouse.com.