

## THE WARNING PASSAGES OF HEBREWS: A FORMAL ANALYSIS AND THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Few are the number of Christians who have not been at least troubled by the warning passages of Hebrews, troubled perhaps to the point of despair or even terror. It is in these passages that the singular issue of the security of the believer is apparently addressed: Are believers unconditionally secure with respect to their final salvation or is their salvation conditional upon their own faithfulness to God? Can true believers lose their faith and thereby forfeit their final salvation? The warning passages of Hebrews address this issue of the security of the believer directly, but I am not persuaded that the response to them should be one either of fear or despair. Instead, I contend that a new approach to these difficult passages can alleviate much of the fear they have generated.

Now while it would be foolhardy to think that any theologian could finally resolve the tension that exists between major theological options (in this case between Calvinism and Arminianism<sup>1</sup>), it is not foolish to engage our attention once more in the biblical texts that have decisively shaped the contours of the discussions. In what follows I hope to shed some light on the theological issues dividing Calvinism and Arminianism by

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<sup>1</sup>An excellent survey of Arminianism may be found in J. S. O'Malley, "Arminianism," in *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (ed. D. G. Reid, R. D. Linder, B. L. Shelley, and H. S. Stout; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990) 77-79. See also C. H. Pinnock, ed., *The Grace of God, The Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989). The position advocated in this paper, however, is not a Wesleyan or Methodist form of Arminianism but rather stems from the evangelical Anabaptist tradition. For a survey and the emphases of Anabaptism, see H. J. Loewen, "Anabaptist Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology* (ed. J. I. Packer, S. B. Ferguson, and D. F. Wright; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988) 18-20. On Calvinism, besides the works of John Calvin himself, cf. the summaries of R. W. A. Leitham, "Reformed Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, 569-72; W. S. Reid, "Calvinism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. W. A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 186-88. For a thorough defense of a Calvinist form of argument for the Pauline epistles, see J. M. Cundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Slaying In and Falling Away* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990).

examining the warning passages of Hebrews.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, we will look at the warning passages (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:1-29<sup>3</sup>), not as unrelated texts as they have been traditionally

<sup>2</sup>The following commentaries have been cited: J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (trans. and ed. by J. Owen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948); B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970 [3rd ed. of 1909]); J. Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924); H. Windisch, *Der Hebräerbrief* (HNT 14; 2d ed.; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1931); C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (2 vols.; Elbib; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1952-53); Ö. Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEKNT 13; 13th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975); P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); D. Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989); F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

In addition, the following technical studies were of special value: H. H. Hohenstein, "A Study of Hebrews 6:4-6," *CTM* 27 (1956) 433-44, 536-46; E. Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter of Hebrews* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984 [2d ed. of 1957]); C. E. Carlston, "Eschatology and Repentance in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *JBL* 78 (1959) 296-302; R. Shank, *Life in the Son* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1961), esp. 224-36; I. H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1969) 137-57; R. Nicole, "Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (ed. G. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 355-64; J. V. Dahms, "The First Readers of Hebrews," *JETS* 20 (1977) 365-75; C. R. Schoonhoven, "The 'Analogy of Faith' and the Intent of Hebrews," in *Scripture, Tradition and Interpretation: Essays Presented to Everett F. Harrison by His Students and Colleagues in Honor of His Seventy-fifth Birthday* (ed. W. W. Gasque, W. S. LaSor; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 91-110; G. Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics: The Epistle to the Hebrews as a New Testament Example of Biblical Interpretation* (SNTSMS 36; Cambridge: University Press, 1979); V. D. Verbrugge, "Towards a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6," *Calvin Theological Journal* 15 (1980) 61-73; D. Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the 'Epistle to the Hebrews'* (SNTSMS 47; Cambridge: University Press, 1982); M. Rissi, *Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefs. Ihre Verankerung in der Situation des Verfassers und seiner Leser* (WUNT 41; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987); T. K. Oberholtzer, *The Warning Passages in Hebrews*. Part 1: "The Eschatological Salvation of Hebrews 1:5-2:5," *BSac* 145 (1988) 83-97; Part 2: "The Kingdom Rest in Hebrews 3:1-4:13," *BSac* 145 (1988) 185-96; Part 3: "The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4-12," *BSac* 145 (1988) 319-28; Part 4: "The Danger of Willful Sin in Hebrews 10:26-39," *BSac* 145 (1988) 410-19; Part 5: "The Failure to Heed His Speaking in Hebrews 12:25-29," *BSac* 146 (1989) 67-75 (these articles will be referred to below generally as "Warning" and specifically as "Warning 1," "Warning 2," etc.); L. D. Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought* (SNTSMS 65; Cambridge: University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>Some commentators and authors might not include 12:1-29 as a warning passage at all; others might prefer 12:1-3 or 12:18-29. In what follows I will assume that 12:1-29 is a warning passage, although nothing substantial will be based on this exegetical and structural conclusion. The primary reason I see 12:1-29 as a warning passage is its place in the structure of the book of Hebrews. I see 11:1-12:19 (saving faith) as the third theological issue in Hebrews, the first two being angels (1:5-2:18) and priests (3:1-10:39). In each of these three main sections are found warnings based on the theological issues (angels, priests, and faith: cf. 2:1-4 with 1:5-14 and 2:5-18; cf. 3:7-4:13, 5:11-6:12, and 10:19-39 with 3:1-6, 4:14-5:10, and 6:13-10:18; cf. 12:1-29

treated,<sup>4</sup> but as an organic whole, each of which expresses four components of the author's message.<sup>5</sup>

Before we look at the warning passages synthetically, we need to survey the positions on the nature of the audience briefly.<sup>6</sup> In general, one might say there are four positions on the nature of the warnings and their audience: the hypothetical view, the false believer view, the phenomenological believer view, and the covenant community view. To a brief explanation of each I now turn.

The *hypothetical view* contends that the warnings are real but the sin that is warned about has neither been committed nor can it be committed since true believers cannot fall away. In essence, the warnings are genuine warnings about a hypothetical sin and these warnings have the sole purpose of jarring the reading believer into moral rectitude and perseverance.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the *phenomenological-false believer view*<sup>8</sup> contends that the warnings are real and are directed toward people who can genuinely commit the sin but that those who can commit this sin are not genuine believers, even if they do exercise some level of faith. It is normally argued that the readers of Hebrews included persons who had the signs of faith but did not in fact have genuine faith. These phenomenological-false believers are not genuine, either because they are pretentious (i.e., they are fakes and fraudulent) or because they are simply unregenerate and have not experienced the saving grace of God which is alone sufficient to sustain persevering

with 11:1-40). The final section of Hebrews, 13:1-25, is given over to general exhortations.

<sup>4</sup>When the warning passages of Hebrews are mentioned, Heb 6:4-6 gets all the glory. However, as anyone who has treated the warning passages in general to a more minute study knows, Heb 10:19-39 is much more difficult for the Calvinist explanation of theology. The prominence of Hebrews 6, I am suggesting, is generated by a failure to treat the warning passages in Hebrews synthetically. See more below.

<sup>5</sup>A similar methodological observation was made by Carlston ("Eschatology," 296) when he noted both genre and terminological similarities in the warning passages.

<sup>6</sup>On the history of interpretation of Hebrews, see esp. H. Feld, "Der Hebräerbrief: Literarische Form, religionsgeschichtlicher Hintergrund, theologische Fragen," *ANRW* 2.25.4 (1987) 3522-3603; Hurst, *Epistle*.

<sup>7</sup>R. Nicole says of the hypothetical view that "it tends to artificiality" ("Some Comments," p. 356).

<sup>8</sup>So Calvin, *Hebrews*, and many conservative evangelicals who argue vigorously for "eternal security," whether they are Calvinist or simply non-Arminian. E.g., the massively influential C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1917) 1295 n. 2; S. Toussaint, "Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (1982) 67-80; Oberholtzer, "Warning"; P. E. Hughes, *Hebrews*, passim. Nicole ("Some Remarks," 359) says "... they must be viewed as men and women who have received an exceptionally thorough exposure to the gospel and all that it entails, and who may have made an external profession of acceptance of it, so that for a season they shared in the blessings and the fellowship of God's people, but who at a later point have made spectacular shipwreck as to the faith, renouncing their earlier profession, and manifesting such opposition to the gospel of grace as to make evident that they have placed themselves beyond the range where God will reach them." Calvin's own views are set forth systematically in the *Institutes*.

faith. It is important to realize here that an admirable theological sophistication informs this view: many who hold the phenomenological-false believer view have a careful definition of faith that largely determines the outcome. This definition, drawn in part from careful exegesis of the rest of Hebrews, sees faith as involving both trust in God's provision in Christ and perseverance in this trust and in obedience to Christ. It follows that if a "believer" does not persevere in either this trust or this obedience, that person is not a "genuine" believer and has never experienced regeneration. In this case, the "believer" cannot lose salvation because saving faith has never been exercised. Thus, this position advocates that the warnings are real only for "false believers."<sup>9</sup>

The third view, the one expounded in this paper, advocates that the audience of the letter to the Hebrews is the *phenomenological-true believer*<sup>10</sup> and that the warnings are given to believers who can genuinely commit the sin.<sup>11</sup> Those who can commit this sin are presently believers in every observable sense. This view contends that phenomenological believers can lose their faith and forfeit final, eternal salvation.<sup>12</sup> This view also contends

<sup>9</sup>"Election" is the foundation of many Calvinists' view of the apostates in Hebrews. It must be emphasized, however, that election is simply not fundamental to our author's theological constructions. Hints of divine sovereignty are perhaps to be glimpsed in 2:10-16; 3:3-4 and 6:1 (I owe these references to David Peterson).

<sup>10</sup>The term "phenomenological" refers here to what is observable rather than to what is necessarily ontological (which, in this case, only God knows certainly). Except in rare and clear cases, I would contend that when the author takes pains to describe something about a given church phenomenologically he or she is also describing that church ontologically — although not necessarily exhaustively. Thus, if the author contends that his or her readers are believers I would argue that they are believers (though some may be unbelievers).

<sup>11</sup>In general, Arminians conclude that the readers are believers, that the sin is apostasy, and that the final consequence for apostasy is eternal damnation. Dispensationalists, however, can argue that the readers are genuine believers, that the sin is apostasy, but that the consequences are either loss of rewards or prohibition from reigning in the millennial kingdom or both. See, e.g., Oberholzer, "Warning."

<sup>12</sup>I use the term "phenomenological" here in distinction to, but not necessarily in opposition to, "real," "genuine," "professing," or "true." Hebrews teaches that saving faith is persevering faith; if it is argued that only persevering faith is genuine or true faith (and non-persevering faith, for whatever motivation, is not genuine faith), then it follows that one cannot have genuine faith and commit apostasy. (This is a possible inference from the perfect  $\pi\epsilon\rho\epsilon\chi\alpha\mu\epsilon\upsilon$  in Heb 3:14; cf. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984] 33; contra Carson, see S. E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* [SBC 1; New York: Peter Lang, 1989] 269, who sees the perfect as "timeless"). What I mean by "phenomenological" is that the person who has this kind of faith is not pretentious. Rather, the "phenomenological" believer experiences faith so far as he or she is capable; however, this person also commits apostasy and so is eternally condemned, even though faith was formerly phenomenological. It will be argued in what follows that this "phenomenological" faith is all that humans can experience in the present order of things; some of these believers persevere unto eternal life and others will not and so will be condemned. These former believers had a phenomenological faith but did not persevere; these latter believers had a phenomenological faith but did persevere and so had

vigorously that there is no evidence in Hebrews that the readers are perceived by the author to be either fakes or unregenerate. Rather, the author treats them as believers and identifies himself so closely with them that division into true and false believers is impossible.

Fourth, V. D. Verbrugge has argued, especially with respect to Heb 6:4-8, that individual Christians are not primarily in view. Rather, as the OT background to Heb 6:7-8 would inform us (Isa 5:1-7), the author is warning about the rejection by God of a (local) covenant community when that community as a whole turns away from God's will. And, he contends, rejection of a community does not necessitate rejection of every individual. This is the *covenant community view*.<sup>13</sup>

Before turning to a synthetic examination of the warning passages, one matter deserves immediate clarification, namely, the *form* of the warning passages. In my study of the warning passages, which began while in seminary but became particularly acute when I began to teach Hebrews to Divinity school students, I was interested primarily in the soteriological significance of the exegetical results of these passages. However, in the process of exegeting each carefully I began to observe that each of the warning passages comprised at least four elements and that the delineation of each of these components was a potentially fruitful way of examining the theological debate. Accordingly, I want to take a brief look at the form of the warning passages before we proceed to examine each of the components separately.

## II. THE FORM OF THE WARNING PASSAGES

The warning passages in Hebrews share a common form: each has four elements or components.<sup>14</sup> In each warning passage we find: (1) the *subjects* or *audience* who are either committing or in danger of committing, (2) the *sin* that leads to (3) the *exhortation* which, if not followed, leads to (4) the *consequences* of that sin. Careful

"genuine" or "true" or "real" or "saving" faith. What I wish to do with these terms is remain true to the vocabulary of Hebrews, where "believer" is used for some who may be finally damned (see below). In the end, the issue is clearly how the author defines "faith." I will suggest that the author uses it in a way that is not always similar to the way many evangelicals use it, e.g., for whom faith is always saving, genuine, and true. Furthermore, I will suggest that the salvation-historical grid of inaugurated eschatology must be carefully understood before either faith or salvation can be properly understood in Hebrews.

<sup>13</sup>See Verbrugge, "New Interpretation." I shall examine this stimulating suggestion in section six below.

<sup>14</sup>These components in the warning passages, however, do not appear in any specific order and emphasis is given to different components in separate warning passages. In this sense, it may be slightly inaccurate to speak of the "form" of a warning passage as form criticism has traditionally done; what we intend by "form" is little more than "the formal features or components." A formal analysis of similar warning passages in the OT, Jewish literature, and the NT needs to be undertaken.

study shows that the passages themselves are dominated by these themes, if at times a passage emphasizes one or more of the components to the neglect of another.

I will propose that a synthesis of each component as revealed in each warning passage provides clarity on the meaning of a given component in a single passage. In particular, this synthesis of components sheds penetrating light on the nature of the sin being described and on the subjects being addressed. Two illustrations will show the potential value of a synthetic approach.

First, if one relied totally upon 2:1-4 or 6:4-6, and did not take into consideration the decisive and clear evidence of 3:7-4:13 or 10:19-39 for the nature of the potential sin that the author warns his readers about, Christian leaders would have a much more difficult time defining the nature of the sin for their congregations. Thus, we would have such ambiguous metaphors as "drifting away" and "falling away" as the sole basis upon which to build our exhortations. However, when we factor in Heb 3:12, with its warning not to "turn away" from the living God or to "apostasize," or Heb 10:26-29, with its warnings about "deliberate sin," "trampling the Son of God" and "regarding the blood of the covenant as common," it becomes altogether clear that "drifting away" is not a momentary (however real) lapse into sin from which one repents. Rather, as I will argue below, the writer has a particular sin in mind: apostasy.

A second example is provocative but serves our purpose well. The mentioning of "the sin that so easily entangles"<sup>15</sup> (12:1) has been fertile ground for the imagination of preachers. This sin has been identified specifically and differently by so many that I wonder if we have not missed the point entirely. If this verse comes in the final warning passage (and it fits the form) and if the sin mentioned here is the same sin that is described elsewhere, then it follows that looking for a specific sin that particularly harms Christian spiritual development (e.g., pride, lust, etc.) is inappropriate. Rather, this sin, according to a synthetic analysis of Hebrews, is the sin that is found in the other warning passages: apostasy. I suggest here, and will do so again below, that this is the kind of result that we can achieve by a synthetic analysis of the warning passages. What I am advocating here is that proper exegesis of the warning passages in Hebrews requires a sensitivity to the kind of passage we are examining (a warning passage) and a careful examination of each component in each warning passage as the kind of comparative evidence that gives us a fuller picture of

<sup>15</sup>The word "easily" (NIV) is not found explicitly in the Greek; the expression is τὴν εὐπερίστατον ἀμαρτίαν. The prefix εὐ- need not necessarily mean that believers are commonly or easily ensnared in this sin but may (more probably) describe the effectiveness of this sin: this sin, when it grips a person, traps and captures effectively. For a survey of the options, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 355, who prefers the translation "besets" and contends that it is to be understood in a hostile sense.

what the author intends. Put differently, we cannot understand one warning passage, especially 6:4-6, until we have understood all the warning passages, because each sheds light on the other.

Anyone in touch with the history of theological syntheses knows that the two particular volatile issues in the exegesis of Hebrews, particularly as it touches upon the warning passages, involve answers to two central sets of questions: (1) Who are the subjects? Are they genuine believers? Or, are they false or pretentious believers? and (2) What is the sin these subjects are in danger of committing? Is it apostasy? Is it "the sin unto death?" Or, is it a sin which, though leading to the heaviest discipline of the Lord, does not finally exclude a person from God's presence? Just what is this sin? I contend that clearer answers to each of these questions can be achieved only by examining the warning passages synthetically.<sup>16</sup> The following table summarizes the evidence:

#### The subjects or audience

From:

2:1-4: cf. 2:1, 3, 4  
3:7-4:13: cf. 3:7-11, 12, 13, 14, 15; 4:1-3, 11  
5:11-6:12: cf. 5:12; 6:1-6, 9, 10  
10:19-39: 10:19-39 (1st pl. verbs); 10:23, 25, 26, 32-34, 35, 39  
12:1-3, 18-29 (=12:1-29?): 12:1-3 (1st pl. verbs), 4, 5-11, 18, 22-24, 25, 28-29

#### The sin<sup>17</sup>

From:

2:1-4: cf. 2:1, 3  
3:7-4:13: cf. 3:8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16-19; 4:1, 2, 6, 7, 11  
5:11-6:12: cf. 5:11, 13-14; 6:6, 12  
10:19-39: 10:25, 26, 28-30, 35, 38, 39  
12:1-3, 18-29 (=12:1-29?): 12:1, 3, 4, 14-17, 25

<sup>16</sup>It might be argued that the assumption that each warning passage is addressing the same audience and describing (or assuming) the same sin is gratuitous. This may be true but (1) there is no evidence, on the other side, that different audiences are in view and (2) it is consistent that the author would be addressing the same audience and be referring to the same sin throughout—especially when we consider that there is no evidence to the contrary and that the author has composed such a unified book. So also Toussaint, "Eschatology," 67.

<sup>17</sup>The view that in Hebrews the entire complex of sin-warning-consequences is merely hypothetical, in the sense that the author was warning them sternly about something they could not in fact really commit (since they were genuine believers), is rarely argued and will not be integrated into the discussion which follows. P. E. Hughes says, "The danger of apostasy, it must be emphasized, is real, not imaginary" (*Hebrews*, 206). See also Marshall, *Heb*, 146. On the other hand, some scholars have argued that the sin being warned against is hypothetical but only in the sense that it has not yet been committed; that sin is a real possibility (e.g., Guldrie, *Hebrews*, 145; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 66).



**The exhortation****From:**

- 2:1-4: cf. 2:1  
 3:7-4:13: cf. 3:7-8, 12, 13, 14, 15; 4:1, 11  
 5:11-6:12: 6:1, 11-12  
 10:19-39: 10:19-25, 32-34, 35-36, 38, 39  
 12:1-3, 18-29 (=12:1-29?): 12:1-3, 5-6, 7, 12-13, 14-17, 25-29

**The consequences****From:**

- 2:1-4: cf. 2:2-3  
 3:7-4:13: cf. 3:11, 17, 18-19; 4:1, 2, 3, 9-10, 11, 12-13  
 5:11-6:12: 6:1, 7-8, 9, 10, 11, 12  
 10:19-39: 10:25, 26-31, 34, 35, 36, 38, 39  
 12:1-3, 18-29 (=12:1-29?): 12:2, 9, 10-11, 14, 15, 17, 25-29

In addition to these four, another component appears twice and might be considered a component of a warning passage in spite of its absence at times. This component can be profitably labeled the *pastoral encouragement* and is found at 6:9 and 10:39.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, three times the author roots his exhortation in a description of the conversion of his readers and makes theological or practical inferences from that description (2:3-4; 6:4-5; 10:22, 32-34).<sup>19</sup>

The methodological corollary of this table is simple: when we need to know the meaning of an individual expression in any of the warning passages and are unsure as to the precise nuance intended by our author, it is both compulsory and eminently helpful to comb through the evidence about the same component in the other warning passages to help resolve our initial difficulties. A synthesis of each component, then, is the best procedure for determining meaning for each passage.

It was mentioned above that the order of the separate components varies by passage. For the sake of completeness, we include here a chart that lists the order of the components by warning passage. At times a component is unlisted when it comes to

the structure of the passage because in that passage one or more components are not addressed separately.

**The Order of the Components of Each Warning Passage:**

- |     |                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (1) | 2:1-4 <sup>20</sup> | Exhortation (2:1a)<br>Sin (2:1b)<br>Consequences (2:2-3a)<br>Salvation verified (2:3b-4)                                                                                                              |
| (2) | 3:7-4:13            | Exhortations (3:7-4:11)<br>Sin (3:12-13)<br>Consequences (4:12-13)                                                                                                                                    |
| (3) | 5:11-6:12           | Audience (5:11-14)<br>Exhortation (6:1-6) [Exhortation (6:1-3) and Audience (6:4-6)]<br>Sin (6:6)<br>Consequences (6:7-8)<br>Exhortation (6:9-12)                                                     |
| (4) | 10:19-39            | Exhortation (10:19-25)<br>Sin (10:26a)<br>Consequence (10:26b-31)<br>Exhortation (10:32-39)                                                                                                           |
| (5) | 12:1-29             | Exhortation (12:1-3)<br>Audience (12:4-11)<br>Exhortation (12:12-13)<br>Exhortation (12:14-17)<br>Exhortation (12:18-24)<br>Exhortation (12:25a)<br>Consequence (12:25b-27)<br>Exhortation (12:28-29) |

It remains now to examine the various components synthetically. I will discuss the components in the following order: Exhortation, Consequence, Sin, and Audience.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup>A component or two is sometimes not directly addressed in some of the warnings but, in each warning, something about each of the components does emerge from the text. In the first warning, for instance, there is no specific section given to the audience, however implicit that audience might be. However, at 6:1-6 the audience is directly addressed. The outlines provided here are not intended to be complete but reflect our concern with these four components, and we have had to simplify in order to avoid long discussions of logical flow and structure.

<sup>21</sup>It is obvious that I will not be able to exegete each expression. In fact, comments on each section are by necessity brief. Footnotes will often point the reader to lengthier discussions.

<sup>18</sup>For this component in the Pauline correspondence, cf. S. N. Olson, "Pauline Expressions of Confidence in His Addressees," *CBJQ* 47 (1965) 282-95. See also Peterson, *Perfection*, 182-83. R. Schnackenburg, in commenting on the severity of the author's expressions, says, "Perhaps, with delicate pastoral tact, he himself felt that he had gone almost too far with this warning and should encourage his readers, for by way of conciliation he then adds a reference to their former testing in the battle of suffering (10:32ff). Thus he warns and threatens his readers without depressing them, praises and encourages them without for a single moment allowing any lack of clarity about the present dangerous crisis. He is a profoundly solicitous and ardently loving teacher" (*The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* [New York: Seabury, 1966] 377).

<sup>19</sup>See esp. Rissi, *Theologie*, 3-8. In fact, Rissi sees their charismatic experiences as the "essential point of departure" ("der wesentliche Ansatz") for all the theological and paraenetic reflection in Hebrews.

## III. EXHORTATION IN THE WARNING PASSAGES

For each of the components I will begin with a comprehensive, if not exhaustive, listing of the crucial terms and expressions from the warning passages that impinge upon the component under investigation. In each of these sections, however, the discussion is limited to evidence from the warning passages. It would be profitable to augment these listings with evidence from Hebrews from the doctrinal sections.

Exhortation in the Warning Passages:<sup>22</sup>

προσέχω ("pay attention"; 2:12)  
κατανοέω ("fix one's attention"; 3:1; 10:24)  
κατέχω ("hold on"; 3:6b, 14; 10:23)<sup>23</sup>  
βλέπετε... μήποτε ἔσται ἐν τινὶ ὑμῶν καρδία πονηρὰ ἀπιστίας  
("see to it... lest any of you have an evil, unbelieving heart";  
3:12)  
παρακαλεῖτε ἑαυτούς ("encourage one another"; 3:13)  
φοβηθῶμεν... μήποτε ("let us fear... lest"; 4:1)  
σπουδάζωμεν ("let us strive hard"; 4:11)  
κρατῶμεν ("let us hold fast"; 4:14)  
προσερχώμεθα μετὰ παρησίας ("let us approach with confidence";  
4:16; 10:22)<sup>24</sup>  
ἀφέντες... ἐπὶ τὴν τελειότητα φερώμεθα ("leaving... let us carry  
on to perfection"; 6:1;<sup>25</sup> cf. 5:14)<sup>26</sup>  
μὴ ἀποβάλητε τὴν παρησίαν ὑμῶν ("do not cast away your  
confidence"; 10:35)  
ὑπομονῆς ἔχετε χρεῖαν ("you have need of perseverance"; 10:36)  
οὐ ὑπομονῆς τρέχωμεν ("let us run with perseverance"; 12:1)  
ἀναλογισασθε ("consider [him]"; 12:3)

<sup>22</sup>Frequently the Greek word order has been altered to provide for the reader the exhortation word first. On the exhortation of Hebrews, cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 21-23; Rissi, *Theologie*, 8-25.

<sup>23</sup>See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 64 n. 16.

<sup>24</sup>O. Glombitza argues that the triad of faith, hope, and love is the foundation for the entire exhortation in 10:19-25; see his "Erwägungen zum kunstvollen Ansatz der Perseuse im Brief an die Hebräer - X 19-25," *NovT* 9 (1967) 132-50, here 146-47.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Glombitza, "Erwägungen," 133-38; Rissi, *Theologie*, 97-100.

<sup>26</sup>Whether 6:1-3, tied as it is to 5:11-14, is intended to relate an actual "educative process" is not clear. See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 155-65, who correctly disagrees with the interesting view of H. P. Owen, "The 'Stages of Ascent' in Hebr. V.11-VI.3," *NTS* 3 (1956-57) 243-53. The view of J. Clifford Adams, that 6:1-3 describes the teachings of Jesus, not Christian theology, and that the sin was an unwillingness to embrace the person and work of Christ in addition to his teachings, is weakened by a consideration of the nature of the christological element in the sin (see below). See "Exegesis of Hebrews vi, 14," *NTS* 13 (1966-67) 378-85; Peterson, *Perfection*, 179-80.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. M. Silva, "Perfection and Eschatology in Hebrews," *WTJ* 39 (1976) 60-71, here 66-70, who discusses the ambiguity of the two references to "perfection"; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 162-63; Peterson, *Perfection*, 176-85.

ὑπομένετε εἰς παιδείαν ("endure hardship as discipline"; 12:7)<sup>28</sup>  
ἀνορθώσατε τὰς παρειμένας χεῖρας καὶ τὰ παραλελυμένα γόνατα  
("strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees"; 12:12)  
ποιεῖτε τροχίους ὁρθοὺς τοῖς ποσὶν ὑμῶν ("make level paths for  
your feet"; 12:13)  
διώκετε εἰρήνην... καὶ τὸν ἀγιασμόν ("make every effort to live in  
peace... and to be holy"; 12:14)  
ἐπισκοποῦντες μὴ τις ὑστερῶν ἀπὸ τῆς χάριτος τοῦ Θεοῦ ("see to  
it that no one misses the grace of God"; 12:15)  
φύουσα μὴ τις βίζα πικρίας ἀνω ἐνοχλή [or ἐν χολῇ]... ("see to  
it that... no bitter root grows up..."; 12:15)<sup>29</sup>  
ἐπισκοποῦντες... μὴ τις πόρνος ἢ βέβηλος ("see that no one is  
sexually immoral, or is godless..."; 12:16)  
βλέπετε μὴ παραιτήσῃτε ("see to it that you do not refuse"; 12:25)  
ἔχωμεν χάριν ("let us be thankful"; 12:28)

We must now synthesize these individual words and expressions into a comprehensive concept. In essence, the exhortation to the audience is "to persevere in faith"; put differently, the exhortation is "faithfulness."<sup>30</sup> The author's expression "you have need of perseverance" (10:36) is his watchword, and some have seen the theme of the "faithful wandering people of God," traveling toward the heavenly city, as the leitmotif of Hebrews.<sup>31</sup> Attridge speaks for a host of commentators when he says: "If one element serves to focus the

<sup>28</sup>See the exposition of the need to suffer as an aspect of perseverance in Rissi, *Theologie*, 21-23.

<sup>29</sup>This "bitter root" does not refer to a hidden personality problem or a psychological problem but to someone in the Christian community (e.g., a heretic or an apostate) who, either through teaching or life-style or both, leads others away from the gospel. See the discussion in Attridge, *Hebrews*, 368; P. E. Hughes, *Hebrews*, 538-39.

<sup>30</sup>See E. Grässer, *Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief* (MTS 2; Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1965), who sees faith primarily as a moral category. On Grässer, see esp. the thorough critique of G. Hughes, *Hermeneutics*, 137-42, and the evaluation of Hurst, *Epistle*, 72-74, 119-24. On the notion of faith in Hebrews, cf. also the lucid exposition and important corrections of scholarship in Hurst, *Epistle*, 119-24; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 311-14; Käsemann, *Wandering*, 37-45 (who describes faith correctly as "an eschatological posture"; cf. p. 40); G. Dautenberg, "Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief," *BZ* 17 (1973) 181-77; Rissi, *Theologie*, 104-13.

<sup>31</sup>This, of course, is the special angle of Käsemann, *Wandering*, 17-96; but see A. Vanhoye, "Longue marche ou accès tout proche? Le contexte biblique de Hébreux III,7 - IV,11," *Bib* 49 (1968) 9-26, who calls Käsemann's approach into question and argues that the author is concerned, not with "wandering," but with "entrance into the Land." Vanhoye points to weaknesses in Käsemann (including both a misjudged gnostic context and the exaggerating of the pilgrimage motif), but Käsemann is right to emphasize the importance of perseverance in Christian existence. See his *Wandering*, 19, 22-66. To put Käsemann's emphasis into perspective sharply, M. Rissi has seen that for Käsemann the notion of hope is tied to "wandering"; Rissi says, "Ob man vom 'wandernden' oder 'wartenden' Volk sprechen möchte, macht keinen großen Unterschied"; ET: "Whether one wants to speak of 'wandering' or 'waiting' does not make much difference"; see his *Theologie*, 17.

overall paraenetic program of Hebrews it is the exhortation to be faithful.<sup>32</sup> And he goes on to say that "faith has an intellectual or cognitive aspect whereby the believer assents to the reality of God, God's involvement with the world, and God's justice. At the same time faith is not simply belief, but trusting fidelity. That fidelity encompasses both the more 'static' virtue of endurance . . . but also the 'dynamic' virtue of movement."<sup>33</sup>

Although the word-group is not heavily used in Hebrews, the *δικαιο* word-group in Hebrews confirms this interest in faithfulness and obedience (cf. 10:38; 11:7, 33). The word-group is used in the classical (Hebrew) sense of behavior that conforms to God's will as revealed to his people, and to be pronounced "righteous" is a description of a person who is obedient and law-abiding.<sup>34</sup> And to be pronounced "righteous", from God's point of view, is to be granted salvation (10:38; 11:7). The condition of salvation, then, from the human side is obedience, or fidelity to God.<sup>35</sup> This is the burden of the exhortation in Hebrews. Our book is not simply a dispassionate treatise on the differences between Judaism and Christianity or an apologetic on the superiority of the Christian revelation. No, instead, the book is essentially a pastoral missive designed to appeal to the religious affections of these readers and to propel them onward toward a life of obedience, courage, and fidelity to God's revelation in Christ (which is superior to the revelation of the former covenant). The author's arguments are expounded with great theological and hermeneutical sophistication.

Of the four components in Hebrews, surely this is the easiest to synthesize and define. The author, from beginning to end, urges his readers to persevere in the faith, to heed the Word of God in obedience,<sup>36</sup> and he contends that this perseverance is a necessity for those who are God's people. The much-beloved chap. 11 is a listing of Israel's heroes who had persevering faith and thus provides examples of the author's exhortations.<sup>37</sup> In this chapter we see a faith that acts; we see the "obedience of faith."

<sup>32</sup>Attridge, *Hebrews*, 22. By "movement," Attridge is referring to such expressions as approaching God (4:16), striving to enter the rest of God (4:11), and pressing on to maturity (6:1); in addition, he sees movement in running (12:1) and going forth (13:13).

<sup>33</sup>See esp. E. Gräßer, "Rechtfertigung im Hebräerbrief," in *Rechtfertigung. Festschrift für Ernst Käsemann zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. J. Friedrich, et al.; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1976) 79-93, esp. 80-87; for the Jewish context, see esp. B. Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew and his World of Thought* (SNTSMS 41; Cambridge: University Press, 1980) 13-76.

<sup>34</sup>See Schoonhoven, "Analogy of Faith," 98-99.

<sup>35</sup>See Rissi, *Theologie*, 8-13.

<sup>36</sup>On Hebrews 11, see esp. S. Frost, "Who Were the Heroes? An Exercise in Biblical Testamentary Exegesis, with Christological Implications," in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament. Studies in Christology in Memory of George Bradford Caird* (ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright; Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 163-72; M. R. Crosby, "The Rhetorical Composition of Hebrews 11," *JBL* 107 (1988) 257-73.

Interestingly, of all the discontinuities of Hebrews (e.g., priesthood, covenant, sacrifice, etc.) the one dominating continuity is that the faith under the former

#### IV. CONSEQUENCE IN THE WARNING PASSAGES

Here the matter is two-fold: at times the author promises his readers salvation and blessing, whereas at other times he warns them of untold and inexpressible danger (10:39). It is our task to determine just what consequences the author has in mind both for those who persevere<sup>37</sup> and for those who do not persevere.

##### Consequences in the Warning Passages:

πῶς ἡμεῖς ἐκφευξόμεθα ("how shall we escape?" [2:2; cf. 12:25] [the answer is, "There is no way of escape!"]<sup>38</sup>)  
προσοχέτω ("anger"; 3:10, 17)  
μὴ εἰσελεύσεσθαι (not entering, or falling short, of the rest [salvation]; 3:11, 18-9; 4:1, 6, 11)  
ἔπεσον ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ("fell in the desert"; 3:17)  
ἀδύνατον<sup>39</sup> . . . πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν ("It is impossible to renew unto repentance"; 6:4-6; cf. 12:16-17)<sup>40</sup>

covenant is the same kind of faith that is required of believers under the new covenant. See Feld, "Der Hebräerbrief," 3583; G. Hughes, *Hermeneutics*, 70; Käsemann, *Wandering*, 63-66; Rissi, *Theologie*, 14-15. On the use of the OT in the exposition of Hebrews, see G. B. Caird, "The Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *CJT* 5 (1959) 44-51. I am not persuaded that the author thinks that the people of God of the old covenant is the same as the people of God in the new covenant. Although space prohibits an analysis of the church in Hebrews (see Rissi, *Theologie*, 117-24), Heb 11:39-40 suggests strongly that the old people and the new people are significantly different in that the soteriological arrangements under God's Son (1:1-2) bring the people of God to perfection, unlike the people of the old covenant.

<sup>37</sup>The promise of final salvation will be surveyed in the final section of our paper.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. similar ideas of "no escape" at Pss. Sol. 15:8; Luke 21:36; Rom 2:3; 1 Thess 5:3. Oberholtzer ("Warning I," 97) contends that 2:3 refers to "individual temporal discipline" but (1) the expression "how shall we escape . . ." is not studied, and (2) the consequences described in the other warning passages are not examined as primary parallel references. What a passage "could" mean is not always what it "probably" means.

<sup>39</sup>On "impossible," cf. Calvin, *Hebrews*, 135; *Institutes* 3.3.24; Moffatt *Hebrews*, 79; P. E. Hughes, *Hebrews*, 212-13; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 167-69; contra Spicq *Hébreux*, 2.167-78; Verbrugge, "New Interpretation," 70-71; Bruce, *Hebrews*, 144. Again, however possible the idea is that this expression could mean "impossible with man but possible for God," a careful analysis of the consequences in other warning passages shows that "impossible" here is not to be considered in the context of metaphysics ("Is anything impossible for God?") but in the context and language of judgment. In such a context "impossible" is to be understood as "God will no work in them any longer so it is impossible for them to be restored."

<sup>40</sup>Another illustration of the importance of synthesis may be found here. If we had only this warning of the consequences we might be tempted to think only of temporal punishments, perhaps a life filled with tragedy and an absence of God's solicitude, or of "impossible from the human, but not the divine, side." Thus, one might argue that all that happens to those who do not persevere is that they live the rest of their lives in a state from which they cannot turn. However, if one examines this consequence in light of the other consequences mentioned in the

οὐκέτι περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἀπολείπεται θυσία ("no sacrifice for sins remains"; 10:26)  
 φοβερὰ δὲ τις ἐκδοχὴ κρίσεως καὶ πυρὸς ζῆλος ἐσθλὸν μέλλοντος  
 τοῖς ὑπεναντίους ("but only a fearful expectation of judgment  
 and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God"; 10:27)  
 πῦρ ("fire"; 10:27; 12:29)  
 ἀποθνήσκει χωρὶς οἰκτιρῶν ("died without mercy"; 10:28)  
 τιμωρία ("punishment" or "vengeance" or "retribution"; 10:29), God's  
 judgment (10:30-31)  
 εἰς ἀπώλειαν ("destruction"; 10:39)

The language of 10:26-31 is particularly clear and needs to be the decisive evidence if other images and expressions remain ambiguous. Nonetheless, when the exegete ties together "no escape" (2:2; 12:25), God's anger (3:10, 17), falling short of the rest (3:11, 18-19; 4:1, 6, 11),<sup>41</sup> a condition where no sacrifice remains for someone (10:26), a fearful expectation of judgment (10:27), fire (10:27; 12:29), death without mercy (10:28), and God's judgment (10:30-31), one is forced to conclude that the author is presenting eternal damnation<sup>42</sup> as a potential consequence for those to whom he gives his warnings about sin and his exhortations to persevere.

The consequences of not persevering are highlighted not only in 10:26-31 but also in 5:11-6:12 where blessing for obedience is promised and cursing for disobedience is threatened (6:7-8). And while the author clearly envisages better things of his readers, things pertaining to salvation for those who persevere (6:9), and while he knows that God is just and will reward his readers according to their work of perseverance (6:10), he does not shrink back from a dire warning in 6:4-6, with its illustration at 6:7-8. A few comments on 6:4-8 are in order here.

The contention that "impossible to repent" (6:4-6) means only an inability to return to a former state of intimate fellowship with God is rendered at most unlikely by our synthetic approach.<sup>43</sup> If one examines the list above, especially the threatening dangers found at 10:26-31, one is pressed to agree that the author is not dealing here with the impossibility of reclaiming a recalcitrant sinner (who will nevertheless be saved in the end) but with eternal

warning passages, one acquires a much more well-defined perception of the danger of non-persevering faith. In fact, Esau is an example (12:16-17).

<sup>41</sup>Here again a synthetic approach to the warning passage makes it quite clear that the "rest" in mind is God's present and eternal salvation, in that "rest" corresponds to the positive side of the consequences. That positive side is eternal salvation in the presence of God. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 126-128. See also Hurst, *Epistle*, 71.

<sup>42</sup>So Toussaint, "Eschatology."

<sup>43</sup>Although one cannot come to a decisive conclusion on the basis of word order, the emphasis given to "impossible" in 6:4 is significant and tends to support reading the word absolutely. See above, n. 39.

damnation because that person has apostasized from a former commitment to God's salvation in Christ.<sup>44</sup>

This conclusion regarding the meaning of "impossible to repent" is confirmed by the illustration<sup>45</sup> that follows (6:7-8). Here the author creates a simple two-part analogy between two kinds of land and two kinds of persons:

Good Land (6:7)	Bad Land (6:8)
Drinks in the rain	(Drinks in the rain)
Produces a useful crop	Produces thorns and thistles
Blessing of God	Cursed and burned

It can only reasonably be inferred that those who are blessed by God correspond to those who persevere in 6:4-6. That is, the blessed ones are those who have been enlightened, etc., and who press on to maturity (6:1). They are those who do not fall away (6:6) and who are like the OT saints who persevere (11:1-40). On the other hand, those who are cursed and burned are those who have been enlightened, etc., and who fall away. Thus, the "impossible to repent" expression corresponds directly to the "cursed" and "burned" of 6:8. The image of being cursed by God, with its close association with fire, can only adequately be explained as an allusion to Gehenna or hell, an allusion to God's punishment and retributive justice (Matt 3:10; 7:19; Luke 9:45; John 15:6; Rev 20:9).<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, although the author may emphasize discontinuities, he makes one consistent logical inference from the discontinuity: if judgment took place under the old covenant, then an even greater judgment will take place under the new covenant (cf. 2:1-4; 10:28-29; 12:18-29). The inference is founded upon the kind of discontinuity in view: it is not a bad vs. a good but an inferior vs. a superior or a good vs. a better. The negative implication, with respect to consequences, is that an even stricter punishment obtains. The following logic is at the heart of the author's exhortations: if willful disobedience and apostasy in the Mosaic era brought discipline and prohibited entrance into the Land (a type of the

<sup>44</sup>So also Hohenstein, "Study," 538; Schoonhoven, "Analogy of Faith," 97, who says that "It is not some reward that may be lost, rather it is one's very soul" (see also 103-5).

<sup>45</sup>This illustration is frequently neglected by those who seek to interpret the meaning of 6:4-6. Such a neglect is unfortunate since the illustration clarifies some of the ambiguities of the metaphors in 6:4-6. See also Hohenstein, "Study," 544-45. Verbrugge ("New Interpretation," 62-67) also argues that 6:7-8 is critical, but he infers from the parable that the community, not the individual, is in view. On the background of this parable, see A. Vanhoye, "Heb 6:7-8 et le mashal rabbinique," in *The New Testament Age: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke* (ed. W. Weinrich; 2 vols.; Maccos, CA: Mercer University Press, 1984) 2:527-32.

<sup>46</sup>On this see H. Bietenhard, "Hell, Abyss, Hades, Gehenna, Lower Regions," *NIDNTT* (ed. C. Brown et al.; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 2:208-10; id., "Fire," *NIDNTT* 1. 652-58; Toussaint, "Eschatology," 74-75; contra Oberholtzer, "Warning 3," 324-26, who sees here a description of temporal discipline.



eternal rest), then surely willful disobedience and apostasy in the new era will bring eternal exclusion from the eternal rest.

In light of the final sense of several of these expressions (cf. especially the harsh realities of 10:30-31, 39) and the use of imagery in Hebrews that elsewhere is used predominantly of eternal damnation, it becomes quite clear that the author has in mind an eternal sense of destruction.<sup>47</sup> The author of Hebrews makes it unambiguously clear that those who do not persevere until the end will suffer eternal punishment at the expense of the wrath of God. There is no escape; like the children of Israel who disobeyed, those who shrink back will be destroyed. The consequences for those who apostasize are eternal damnation and judgment; therefore, the author has exhorted his readers to persevere until the end. And so he impresses upon his readers these dire consequences, and by him "we are taught what dread judgment is in store for all the obstinate, who with shameless forehead no less than iron heart now make it a sport to spurn and set at naught the threats of God."<sup>48</sup>

#### V. SIN IN THE WARNING PASSAGES<sup>49</sup>

We now come to a *crux interpretum*. Virtually all commentators and theologians can agree that the exhortation is to persevere and that the warning the writer has in mind entails eternal punishment. But the sin the writer has in mind and the precise nature of that sin have vexed interpreters and divided the church. If our synthetic approach yields what I think is considerable clarity for the nature of this sin, we can make genuine progress in our theological discussions. Again, a list of the words and expressions for the kind of sin the writer mentions in the warning passages precedes our discussion. The list is long and the expressions at times ambiguous but the clearer references provide solid ground for theological construction. Furthermore, we have included all terms that may help move our discussion forward in the definition of the nature of this sin.

<sup>47</sup>It is an insensitivity to the crucial expressions of all the warning passages (besides his theological presuppositions) that leads Oberholtzer to the mistaken conclusion that the consequences of this sin are no more (or less) than a loss of rewards and the authority to rule with Jesus Christ in the millennial kingdom. See his "Warning."

<sup>48</sup>So Calvin, *Institutes* 3.3.25.

<sup>49</sup>Most commentators are satisfied with describing the sin as "apostasy," and a detailed description is thus left to the side. However, some good observations and syntheses can be found in Käsemann, *Wandering*, 45-48; Dahms, "First Readers"; Peterson, *Perfection*, 176-83; Rissi, *Theologie*, 3-25.

#### Words for the Sin in Hebrews:

παρὰρρέω: "slip away, flow by" (2:1)<sup>50</sup>  
 παράβασις: "violation" (2:2)  
 παρακοή: "disobedience" (2:2)  
 ἀμελέω: "ignore, neglect, disregard [one's salvation]" (2:3; cf. Matt 22:5; 1 Tim 4:14)<sup>51</sup>  
 σκληρύνω: "harden your hearts" (3:8 [OT]; 3:13, 15; 4:7)  
 ἐν τῷ παρασκευασμῷ: "in the rebellion" (3:8, 15)[OT]  
 πειρασμός, πειράζω: "test, testing" (3:8,9) [OT] (that is, putting God to the test)  
 ἐν δοκιμασίᾳ: "time of testing" (3:9 [OT])  
 πλανᾶω: "wander" (3:10 [OT])  
 οὐκ ἐγινώσκον τὰς ὁδοὺς μου: "they have not known my ways" (3:10 [OT])  
 καρδία ποιητὰ ἀπιστίας: "sinful, unbelieving heart" (3:12; cf. 3:19)  
 ἐν τῷ ἀποστῆναι ἀπὸ Θεοῦ ζῶντος: "turning away, apostasizing from the living God" (3:12)  
 παραπικραίνω: "embitter, rebel, disobey" (3:16)  
 ἁμαρτάνω: "sin" (3:17; cf. 12:4)  
 ἀπειθεῖω: "disobey, disbelieve" (3:18; 4:6, 11)  
 ὑστερέω: "lack, fall short" (4:1)  
 οὐκ ἀφ᾽ ἑλπίσιν . . . μὴ συγκεκρασμένους τῇ πίστει τοῖς ἀκούσασιν: "was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith" (4:2)<sup>52</sup>  
 πίπτω: "fall" (4:11)  
 παραπίπτω: "fall away" (6:6)<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup>See the discussion of Attridge, *Hebrews*, 64.

<sup>51</sup>On the importance of connecting this exhortation to pay attention and not neglect the word of salvation to the word as presented in Hebrews, cf. E. Gräßer "Das Heil als Wort: Exegetische Erwägungen zu Hebr 2,1-4," in *Neues Testament und Geschichte: Historisches Geschehen und Deutung im Neuen Testament*, Oskar Cullmann zum 70. Geburtstag (Zürich: Theologischer, 1971) 261-74.

<sup>52</sup>The text, as found in Nestle-Aland, 26th edition, is exceedingly difficult (accusative plural). This difficulty led Westcott (*Hebrews*, 93-94, 110-111) to the nominative singular; Bruce leans in the same direction (*Hebrews*, 103 n. 4 [only in the rev. ed.]). For the meaning of the accusative plural, see the superb discussion of Attridge, *Hebrews*, 122, 125-26.

<sup>53</sup>The verb παραπίπτω is used only 1x in the NT and 9x in the LXX: Esth 6:1 (Mordecai is instructed not to "fall away/short" of anything he suggested regarding honoring the man whom the king desired to honor, the Hebrew word is פָּדַח: "to offend, be guilty"); Wis 6:9 ("my words are meant for you so that you may learn wisdom and not fall away"); 12:2 ("you [God] gradually rebuke those who fall away"); the passage parallels this term with "sin" and "evil"; Ezek 14:13 ("if a country sins to the effect of falling away"; here the Hebrew word is 727: "to act unfaithfully," "spiritual adultery"); Ezek 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4 (all as 14:13); Macc 10:4 [v.l. for παραπίπτω] (it denotes falling into sin). See Hohenstein, "Study," 536-38. Calvin states: "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" (*Hebrews*, 136). Unfortunately, Calvin, I think, errs when he

ἀνασταυρόντας ἑαυτοὺς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ  
 παραδειγματίζοντας: "recrucifying to themselves the Son of God  
 and making a public display [of him]" (6:6)  
 ἡθροί: "lazy, sluggish" (5:11; 6:12)  
 μὴ ἐγκαταλείποντες τὴν ἐπισυναγωγὴν ἑαυτῶν, καθὼς ἔθος τισὶν:  
 "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of  
 doing" (10:25)  
 ἐκουσίως ἁμαρτανόντων ἡμῶν: "deliberately sin" (10:26)<sup>54</sup>  
 τοῖς ὑπεναντίοις: "the enemies of God" (10:27; cf. Isa 26:11)  
 ἀθετέω: "reject" (10:28)  
 ὁ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ καταπατήσας: "trample the Son of God"  
 (10:29)  
 τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης κοινὸν ἡγησάμενος: "regarded the blood of  
 the covenant as common" (10:29) [Note: this clause ends with an  
 explicit statement of the Christian status in ἐν ᾧ ἡγιάσθη: "by  
 which one is sanctified"]  
 τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς χάριτος ἐνυβρίσας: "treated with contempt the  
 Spirit of grace" (10:29)  
 μὴ ἀποβάλλετε τὴν παρρησίαν ὑμῶν: "do not throw away your  
 confidence" (10:35)  
 ὑποστολή: "shrink back, become timid" (10:39) [Note: this leads to  
 damnation: εἰς ἀπώλειαν (10:39; cf. 10:38)]  
 τὴν εὐπερίστατον ἁμαρτίαν: "the sin that so easily entangles"  
 (12:1)<sup>55</sup>  
 ἵνα μὴ κάμῃτε ταῖς ψυχαῖς ὑμῶν ἐκλυόμενοι: "in order that you  
 may not be weary in your souls, losing heart" (12:3)  
 ἐκκέλησθε τῆς παρακλήσεως: "you have forgotten that word of  
 encouragement" (12:5)  
 ἵστερῶν ἀπὸ τῆς χάριτος τοῦ Θεοῦ: "misses the grace of God"  
 (12:15)  
 ῥίζα πικρίας: "bitter root" (12:15)<sup>56</sup>  
 πόρνος ἢ βέβηλος ὡς Ἡσαῦ: "sexually immoral, or is godless like  
 Esau" (12:16)<sup>57</sup>  
 παραιτέομαι: "refuse the One who speaks" (12:25)  
 ἀποστρέφω: "turn away from" (12:25)

This is surely an imposing list, but we can be grateful to the author for having raided ancient vocabulary for his descriptions of the sin the readers might commit. We need also to observe the lack

describes this sin as something believers cannot commit; his words are "who were far off from a perfidy so heinous."

<sup>54</sup>Most commentators rightly connect this expression to Num 15:22-31 but also recognize that this sin is more than "conscious sin"; rather it is conscious, high-handed apostasy.

<sup>55</sup>See above, n. 15.

<sup>56</sup>See above, n. 29.

<sup>57</sup>On this difficult collocation of immorality and godlessness, cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 368-69. See also Carlston, "Eschatology," 298-99. The rabbinic texts can be found in Str-B 3.748-49.

of a favorite word on the part of the author for the "sin" that the author fears may take place in his readers.

By way of synthesis, I would recommend that we first eliminate words and expressions that do not offer much clarity—besides others, words like "slip away" (2:1), "sin" (3:17), and "lazy" (5:11; 6:12). It is not that these words are not valuable;<sup>58</sup> rather, it is that they are either so general ("sin") or ambiguous ("slip away") in their metaphorical implication that they are not decisive enough to offer the kind of clarity we are seeking.<sup>59</sup> We need, therefore, to turn to those expressions that are distinct, decisive, and loaded with nuance and significance.

There is a series of terms drawn from the warning passages that are distinct and bear conceptual weight. These terms suggest that the concern of the author is with *apostasy*: ἐν τῷ ἀποστῆναι ἀπὸ Θεοῦ ζῶντος ("turning away from the living God"—3:12);<sup>60</sup> παραπίπτω ("fall away"—6:6); ἀνασταυρόντας ἑαυτοὺς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ παραδειγματίζοντας ("recrucifying to themselves the Son of God and making a public display [of Him]"—6:6); ἐκουσίως ἁμαρτανόντων ἡμῶν ("deliberately sin"—10:26); ὁ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ καταπατήσας ("trample the Son of God"—10:29); τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης κοινὸν ἡγησάμενος ("regarded the blood of the covenant as common"—10:29); τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς χάριτος ἐνυβρίσας ("treated with contempt the Spirit of grace"—10:29); παραιτέομαι ("refuse the One who speaks"—12:25); ἀποστρέφω ("turn away from"—12:25). Here we find words and expressions that speak directly and uniquely about the sin the writer fears: he fears that the readers will turn away from God, away from Jesus Christ's sacrifice that perfects sinners, away from God's Spirit—and he fears that this will be done consciously and intentionally.

This allows us to say that the sin the author has in mind is a willful rejection of God and his Son, Jesus the Messiah, and open denunciation of God and his ethical standards.<sup>62</sup> In essence, there are three characteristics of the apostasy this author has in mind:

<sup>58</sup>Rissi, for instance, makes much of "lazy"; see *Theologie*, 8-21.

<sup>59</sup>See M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 137-69; P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989) 106-87.

<sup>60</sup>Many commentators agree that this expression would be not only highly unusual, but perhaps impossible, as a description of former Jews who had converted to Christianity and were relapsing into Judaism. In the context of first century Christianity it would probably not be the case that Christians would see Jews as not worshipping the living God. The problem early Christians had with Jews was not that they did not worship the living God but that they did not worship the living God through his life-giving Son, Jesus Christ.

<sup>61</sup>See n. 53 above.

<sup>62</sup>When we think of this sin pragmatically (how it took, and takes, place), I do not mean to suggest that apostasy is always a single act of sin. However abrupt or decisive apostasy may be, it could also be the result of a progressive downward spiral into bad habits, attitudes, and dispositions toward God. However, the focus of our author is not on this issue that fascinates our introspective orientation.

first, the author sees this sin being committed deliberately, intentionally and consciously (10:26); second, he sees a "trinitarian" element in this sin—those who turn away from God are turning away from Jesus Christ's sacrifice for sins and the Holy Spirit who brings God's grace into their lives; third, he sees in their sin a resolve<sup>63</sup> to abandon the ethical restrictions of God and his Lordship over their lives.<sup>64</sup> Thus, I think a synthetic approach to the warning passages in Hebrews permits reasonable clarity as to the nature of the sin the author has in mind.

H. H. Hohenstein concludes: "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."<sup>65</sup> And P. E. Hughes concluded that the sin was "a particular disposition involving a repudiation of grace."<sup>66</sup>

It must be noted, however, that the author of Hebrews is not concerned to present to his readers what they were going into when they abandoned the living God and his Son.<sup>67</sup> Thus, he is much less

<sup>63</sup>The present participles in 6:6 (*ἀνασταυρόντας, παραδειγματίζοντας*) indicate that the action is depicted by the author without regard to its completion. One may legitimately infer an element of *persistence* from the present tenses, but this is by no means the primary concern of the author in choosing the present tenses. P. E. Hughes (*Hebrews*, 218 n. 68) and Carlston ("Eschatology," 297) see a single act (aorist of "fall away") with present effects (present tenses), but both misread what the aorist tense is designed to do. More accurately, the aorist tense depicts the action as a whole (globally) while the presents depict the action in progress. There are, however, no deictic indicators present which point the reader toward time concerns.

Another alternative is to understand the two present participles as describing the actions or (unintended) results of pastors who try to effect restoration of apostates. In effect, these pastors recrucify and publicly expose Christ. On this view the *εἰς μέραν* clause goes with what follows, not with *ἀνακαίρειν*. See P. Proulx and L. Alonso Schökel, "Heb 6:4-6: εἰς μέραν ἀνασταυρόντας," *Bib* 56 (1975) 193-203, and L. Sabourin, "Crucifying Afresh for One's Repentance" (Heb 6:4-6)," *BTB* 6 (1976) 264-71. On p. 271 Sabourin translates: "For it is impossible to crucify afresh the Son of God for the sake of one's repentance, mocking him, so as to restore a second time [or reinstate; lit. 'make new again'] those who have once been enlightened . . . and have apostasized [lit. 'have fallen away', 'lapsed']". Again, a synthetic approach to the warning passages disproves this suggestion since the "trampling upon the Son of God" (10:29) parallels the "recrucifixion" participle in 6:6, demonstrating that a (hypothetical) action on the part of the apostates is in view.

<sup>64</sup>In general, many agree with this conclusion; see, e.g., Hohenstein, "Study," 543 ("complete repudiation"); P. E. Hughes, *Hebrews*, 206-22; Marshall, *Kept*, 144, 148.

<sup>65</sup>"Study," 433.

<sup>66</sup>*Hebrews*, 214.

<sup>67</sup>It has sometimes been argued that the (particular and only) sin the author has in mind is the sin of "relapsing into Judaism" and that this particular sin entails the special consequence of eternal damnation. It is then argued that since so few are tempted to relapse into Judaism the teaching is inapplicable to Gentile Christians. In fact, L. Sabourin states: "The problem the author was confronted with has hardly any general application today; the passage no longer has much pastoral relevance" ("Recrucifying," 270). Of late, this entire theory to the background of the book of Hebrews has been called into question (see Dahms, "First Readers"). A moderate,

concerned with a "relapse into Judaism" than are many modern interpreters, who sometimes suggest that focusing on that particular sin somehow resolves the tension the believer feels with respect to his or her security. Attridge has it right when, in discussing the apostasy the author's audience might commit, he says: "It is not what they are drawn to but what they might give up that concerns our author."<sup>68</sup>

An interesting exegetical discussion revolves around how far toward apostasy the readers had already gone.<sup>69</sup> Besides the obvious observation that they had not yet committed apostasy (or he would not have written to them), we are justified in looking for a moment into three recent suggestions. D. G. Peterson has argued, persuasively I think, that the evidence of 5:11-14; 6:4-12 shows that some had succumbed to spiritual lethargy, "involving loss of zeal, lack of confidence and faltering hope" and that this lethargy was directly related to persecution and an inadequate grasp of the person and work of Christ.<sup>70</sup> I would suggest, however, that other evidence from the warning passages permits us to say that spiritual lethargy had, for some, grown into outright apostasy (10:25-29).<sup>71</sup>

J. V. Dahms, on the other hand, has argued that the sin was the "danger of becoming a sect for which Christ is important but for which his death has no soteriological significance."<sup>72</sup> But this view remains problematical. (1) Although these readers may be abandoning fellowship (10:25), there is no evidence that they were forming another fellowship. (2) Dahms's argumentation moves too easily from what the author of Hebrews believes (Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord) to what Dahms thinks the readers were also committed to without carefully explaining how one can draw conclusions about such a mirror reading of the evidence. (3) The "soteriological significance" of Christ cannot be so easily separated from either who he is (i.e., rejecting his work as also rejecting him) or the general category of salvation. That is rejecting his soteriological work is a total rejection of Christ.

and more accurate, accounting of the facts has been suggested by D. Guthrie: "It must be admitted that the warning passages say nothing about apostasy to Judaism, but only apostasy away from Christianity" (*Hebrews*, 33). My view is that, since the author has no concern to describe the sin as relapsing into Judaism, we need to avoid such an hypothesis in our explanations of the sin. In essence, the sin is rejection of salvation in Christ after that salvation had been perceived as from God and received personally. I believe that the readers were not at all being tempted to return to Judaism; rather, they were apostasizing into moral apathy and irresponsibility.

<sup>68</sup>Attridge, *Hebrews*, 369.

<sup>69</sup>See here Peterson, *Perfection*, 176-83; also see his earlier "The Situation of the Hebrews" (5:11-6:12), *Reformed Theological Review* 35 (1976) 14-21, which largely identical to the pages cited in his later monograph.

<sup>70</sup>Peterson, *Perfection*, 186.

<sup>71</sup>So also Dahms, "First Readers," 186.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 371.

Finally, Mathias Rissi, in a distinguished little monograph, suggests that the audience was led off the path ("auf Abwege") as a result of their charismatic enthusiasm. He further develops the notion that the readers had become spiritually proud, enthusiastic in their charismatic experience, and separatistic. These traits led to an inattentiveness to the Word of God. He draws parallels frequently to similar problems at Corinth and contends that the readers were formerly Palestinian priests who had fled, in the face of persecution, to Rome (13:24).<sup>73</sup> The contention that the readers are in Rome is clearly possible,<sup>74</sup> but that they were former priests is at best difficult to demonstrate. However, his virtual limitation of the sin to spiritual pride clearly overlooks the violent nature of the sin described in 6:4-6 and 10:19-39.

In conclusion, it seems best to remain conservative and general with respect to the nature of the sin: it is apostasy. And, as described above, this apostasy is three-fold. But to speculate further is to pretend to know more than the evidence allows. It is not too speculative to suggest that some of the people for whom the writer cares had already abandoned Christianity (10:25); and it is not beyond probabilities to suggest that the graphic words of 10:25-29 are words fraught with historical reminiscence on the part of the author. But to suggest that these people had become a sect, whether for theological or experiential reasons, is to go beyond the evidence.

It might also be said that the author sees this sin as something done intentionally and deliberately. In fact, one notices a strain of publicity in that the sin manifests itself at times in refusal to fellowship with others (10:25) and a certain sense of violent pride.<sup>75</sup> With this sense of public and violent haughtiness we can appreciate why the author chose the Greek word ἐνυβρίζω ("to insult or mock") at 10:29. I suggest that a veritable process of "de-confession" of Christ<sup>76</sup> and his work is in the author's mind as he describes this sin. In other words, this sin is not hidden; it is noticeable and its practitioner is aware of it and proud of it. Pastorally speaking, I would suggest that those who worry over whether they have committed this sin show thereby that they have not committed it. The evidence points not to an attitude of "worry about having committed apostasy" but to a public pride in its practice. Apostasy in Hebrews does not lead to a concern over

<sup>73</sup>Theologie, esp. 5-25.

<sup>74</sup>So, e.g., Attridge, *Hebrews*, 409-10; more complete discussion can be seen in F. Bruce, "To the Hebrews: A Document of Roman Christianity," *ANRW* 2.25.4 (1987) 3496-3521, here 3517-19.

<sup>75</sup>That the sin has a public element can also be found in several terms: παραδειγματίζοντας: "public disgrace" (6:6), ὁ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ καταπατήσας: "trampled the Son of God under foot" (10:29), and τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς χάριτος ἐνυβρίσας: "insulted the Spirit of grace" (10:29).

<sup>76</sup>So also Carlston, "Eschatology," 297.

one's status before God but to pride in one's sinful defiance of God's will.

## VI. AUDIENCE IN THE WARNING PASSAGES

Probably no issue is more crucial to the exegesis of Hebrews and its impact on soteriology than a clear determination of the audience to whom the author writes. And surely the most important passage in Hebrews for this discussion is 6:4-6. But before our attention is focused on 6:4-6, a few general comments about the audience from the warning passages can be presented.<sup>77</sup>

First, at times the author includes himself in the audience and uses the first person plural: "we" (passim; cf., e.g., 2:1-4; 3:14; 4:1, 11, 14-16; 6:1; 10:19; 12:1-3, 25-29). We may infer from this that the author surely did not see the readers as pretentious fakes or he would have consistently addressed them at a greater distance.<sup>78</sup> Second, he calls them "brothers" (3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22 [cf. to 2:11, 12, 17; 8:11]), signifying some kind of special relationship, undoubtedly here at a spiritual level.<sup>79</sup> In addition, he clarifies "brothers" at 3:1 when they are called "holy brothers who share in the heavenly calling" and at 2:11, 12, 17 when they are identified as those whom Christ has saved. At 4:3 he describes the readers as "believers." The reverse side of the "we" exhortations is the use of "you" and the second person plural, especially in the imperative mood (passim; cf. e.g., 3:12; 5:11; 12:18-24). Finally, and critical for interpretation, at 10:29 the author implies that those who are defiling the blood of the covenant (i.e., who are apostates) are sanctified.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup>See also the brief survey of Shank, *Life*, 229-31. At the end of his list, Shank concludes bluntly: "Those who contend that the writer to the Hebrews views his readers as men who have halted short of saving faith in Christ, rather than as true believers, do so out of regard for the necessities of their theology. The evidence of the epistle is against them" (p. 231).

<sup>78</sup>Attridge describes the "us" of 2:1 as a "*captatio benevolentiae*" and then lists the references in Hebrews where there is an alternation between the second person plural imperative and the hortatory subjunctive; he lists 3:1, 12; 10:32; 12:12; 13:7 and 4:1, 11, 16; 6:1; 10:22-24; 13:13 (*Hebrews*, 64 n. 14).

<sup>79</sup>See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 106 and nn. 16, 17. See also Nida-Louw, *Greek-English Lexicon* 11.23. Oberholtzer ("Warning 2," 186) calls them "regenerate."

<sup>80</sup>The use of the third person singular (ὃς ὁ ἡγιασμένος) could be construed impersonally and parenthetically to mean "by which one is sanctified" and then be no comment whatsoever about the status of the person who mistreats the blood of the covenant. P. E. Hughes, for instance, seems to prefer this view, though he devotes no attention to this expression. Instead, he sees "simulated" faith on the part of an apostate rather than genuine faith and refers the act to the ineffectual taking of weekly communion. Cf. *Hebrews*, 422-23; see J. Brown, *Hebrews* (Geneva Series; London: Banner of Truth, 1972 [=1862]) 473-74. A majority of commentators translate the third person singular with "he" and imply that the one who is sanctified is also the one who defiles the blood. See, e.g., Westcott, *Hebrews*, 331; Spicq, *Hébreu*, 2325; Michel, *Hebräerbrief*, 353; L. L. Morris, "Hebrews," 107; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 292, 293. This interpretation seems preferable.



Perhaps more importantly, the author recounts his knowledge of their conversion<sup>81</sup> experience at 2:3-4: they heard those who had heard the Lord, the message was confirmed to them, and they experienced miracles and various gifts of the Spirit. He states that they had been enlightened, had tasted the heavenly gift, had shared in the Holy Spirit, had tasted the goodness of God's Word, and had experienced the powers of the age to come and, furthermore, that they had repented (6:4-6). He also rehearses his knowledge of their (at one time?) consistent Christian life-style at 6:10: they had worked and showed love in the name of Christ. We can infer from 10:22 that these readers had had their hearts sprinkled to cleanse them from a guilty conscience and that they had been washed (perhaps baptized, perhaps metaphorically cleansed by God).<sup>82</sup> In a revealing passage, the author reminds his readers of their previous determination to endure severe persecutions and the sympathy they extended to those who suffered as Christians (10:32-34)—and these things took place after their enlightenment (10:32). In light of his apparent intimate knowledge of their spiritual development, it is not surprising to discover that he addresses his readers in the customary early Christian term for those to whom leaders ministered: "beloved" (6:9).

In summary, the author ascribes to the audience the fullness of early Christian experience: conversion (2:3-4; 6:4-5; 10:22, 32-34), gifts and manifestations of the Holy Spirit (2:3-4; 10:29), spiritual growth, and a Christian commitment that included resistance under considerable pressure (10:32-34). In short, the author treats them as "believers" (4:3) because he saw them as "holy brothers" (3:1). Phenomenologically, the author believes them to be, and presents them as, believers in the fullest sense possible. If these descriptions are accurate, and we believe they are, these readers are most plausibly to be seen as regenerate.<sup>83</sup> But an even finer definition of the audience can be gleaned through an analysis of Heb 6:4-6.

<sup>81</sup>See esp. Rissi, *Theologie*, 3-8.

<sup>82</sup>It is not beyond question that 10:22 refers to baptism, but the images are surely those of salvation and conversion. On 10:22 see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 288-89; Glombitza, "Erwägungen," 139-40.

<sup>83</sup>And here arises yet another theological term with major definitional problems. For some Calvinists, "regeneration" implies an inevitable perseverance. If that be the only acceptable definition of the term, then I prefer not to use "regeneration." However, if regeneration does not necessarily imply God's preservation of the life of the believer, then the term can be used here. My usage of the term is consistent also with a view of regeneration that implies a life-long process. See J. I. Packer, "Regeneration," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 924-26; P. Toon, *Born Again: A Biblical and Theological Study of Regeneration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987). On any definition, regeneration implies the act of God whereby he grants to a person his life and so grants them spiritual life. The issue is whether that life, once granted, can be forfeited or, put differently, whether God's saving and sustaining grace is resistible.

I begin with some grammatical observations: the main sentence is "it is impossible to restore unto repentance." This sentence is modified by a lengthy series of participles which clarify the "subject" of the infinitive (therefore, in the accusative case): five of these explicate the subject (φωτισθέντας, γευσάμενους, γεννηθέντας, μετόχους, γευσάμενους, παραπεσόντας),<sup>84</sup> and two explicate the reasons or circumstances for the impossibility of "renewing unto repentance" (ἀνασταυρόντας, παραδειγματίζοντας). A diagram illustrates these grammatical observations.<sup>85</sup>

6:4-6	γὰρ [αὐτό ἐστίν] ἀδύνατον .....	ἀνακαταίξειν
	τοὺς φωτισθέντας	πάλιν
	ἅπαξ	εἰς μετανοίαν
τε	γευσάμενους τῆς δωρεᾶς	τῆς ἐπουρανίου
καὶ	γεννηθέντας μετόχους πνεύματος ἁγίου	
καὶ	γευσάμενους ῥῆμα καλὸν	Θεοῦ
τε	δυνάμεις αἰῶνος	μέλλοντος
καὶ	παραπεσόντας	τὸν υἱὸν ἑαυτῶν
	ἀνασταυρόντας	τοῦ Θεοῦ
καὶ	παραδειγματίζοντας	

After briefly examining the crucial expressions here, I shall summarize the evidence in Hebrews for the nature of the audience.<sup>86</sup> ἅπαξ φωτισθέντας ("who have once been enlightened").<sup>87</sup> The only other occurrence of the verb φωτίζω in Hebrews is in 10:32

<sup>84</sup>Observe the implication of the word order: the participles precede the verb of which they are the object "in order to fix attention upon the variety and greatness of gifts which have been received and cast away." So Westcott, *Hebrews*, 148.

<sup>85</sup>Rissi contends that whereas the first and last two descriptions are tied together by the particle τε, the middle item is separated from what precedes and what follows by καὶ, giving greater emphasis to the middle description: "who have shared in the Holy Spirit" (*Theologie*, 5). Rissi argues that the audience had members who had become somewhat of a charismatic schism.

<sup>86</sup>The aorist tense in each description does not (of itself) mean that the experience is in the past (and therefore never to be repeated) or that it was completed. The aorist tense signifies non-specific kind of action; that is, not how or when something took or takes place but that it takes place. The author uses the aorist to depict the action holistically and globally. See Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 17-65, 83-108. He argues that the aorist gives a "perfective" conception of the action, the way a helicopter rider might see a parade in its totality. With regard to the participles of 6:4-6, however, the adverbial deictic indicator ἅπαξ, if it applies to each participle (which is not without problems), would then suggest pastness and completeness. However, Porter (and others) would be quick to say that this inference is not inherent to the aorist tense but to the deictic indicator of time.

<sup>87</sup>See P. E. Hughes, *Hebrews*, 207-8; Rissi, *Theologie*, 5-6, 93.

where it apparently refers to conversion ("remember the former days, the days after which you had been enlightened"), as it regularly signifies conversion in early Christian literature.<sup>88</sup> The term denotes "receiving light" or "perceiving" in a way that had not been previously possible (cf. Luke 11:36; John 1:9; Eph 1:18; 3:9) and the passive voice is probably "theological" or "divine"<sup>89</sup> (God has given them this light). "Enlightenment" was often connected with baptism in the early Church, but there is no certainty that a reference is being made here to baptism.<sup>90</sup> The adverbial *ἀπαξ* merely strengthens the historical fact: they were, one time, enlightened.<sup>91</sup> In summary, the audience the writer is addressing is composed of people who received the message of the gospel, and it transformed their mental and spiritual perceptions. This is language of conversion and shows that, at the phenomenological level, the author perceived his readers to be converts and treated them as such.

γευσάμενους τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου ("who have tasted the heavenly gift").<sup>92</sup> The term γεύομαι ("I taste") occurs 3 times in Hebrews (2:9; 6:4, 5). Literally it means "to taste or eat" something (water, wine, meals; cf. Matt 27:34; John 2:9); figuratively, it is used to signify "to come to know something or experience it" (cf. 1 Pet 2:3 [a converting word]; Heb 2:9 [death]; 6:4, 5).<sup>93</sup> It has been frequently argued, especially in a popular format, that "taste" here is to be distinguished from "eating" or "fully digesting."<sup>94</sup> Apart from the theological nicety this interpretation creates for those whose system requires that the audience cannot be Christians in a genuine sense, such a meaning of the word is not discernible from this context or from Hebrews. The author gives no hint that the readers were only "partially converted" or that their experience was only partial. Further, I have never seen any evidence in any of the contexts that the Greek term ever means "taste partially" as opposed to "eat and digest." This is positively contrary to the

<sup>88</sup>See the full listing of evidence in Attridge, *Hebrews*, 169-70, esp. 169 n. 43; see also BAGD, 872-73; and the multitude of references in G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 1508-9; Hohenstein, "Study," 436-38; Oberholtzer, "Warning 3," 321.

<sup>89</sup>See M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963) § 236.

<sup>90</sup>P. E. Hughes, *Hebrews*, 208; Hohenstein, "Study," 437-38; Rissi, *Theologie*, 6 (who sees reference here to baptism to be "völlig abwegig"—"completely out of line"); Windisch, *Hebräerbrief*, 51; H. Conzelmann, "φῶς, κ.τ.λ.," TDNT 9:355 (who shows the difficulty of demonstrating a baptismal reference here); Attridge, *Hebrews*, 169; but cf. Bruce, *Hebrews*, 120.

<sup>91</sup>Though the term denotes "once-for-all" in Heb 9:26; 10:2, it probably does not share that connotation here (cf. 9:7, 27, 28; 12:26, 27; but cf. Bruce, *Hebrews*, 120).

<sup>92</sup>"Heavenly gift" probably refers to "salvation"; cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 170 and n. 51; Rissi, *Theologie*, 6; see further Hohenstein, "Study," 439-40.

<sup>93</sup>See J. Behm, TWNT 1:674-76; BAGD, 157.

<sup>94</sup>Nicole, "Hebrews 6:4-6," 360, 361.

figurative use of the term where it speaks of "participation and experience"<sup>95</sup>—the degree is not the issue.<sup>96</sup>

The readers have "experienced" the "heavenly gift" and the "good Word of God and the powers of the Age to Come" just as Jesus experienced death (2:9). This first notion is to be compared with 3:1 where the readers are "holy brothers who have participated in the heavenly calling." From this expression we may argue reasonably that the readers were those who had experienced the grace of God; put differently, they were at the phenomenological level converts to Jesus Christ.

γενηθέντας μετόχους πνεύματος ἁγίου ("who have become partakers of the Holy Spirit"). The term μέτοχος is used at 1:9; 3:1, 14; 6:4; 12:8. BAGD defines the term as "to share or participate in something."<sup>97</sup> Again, this term is not one used for "partial," as opposed to "full," participation in something. The term reveals that the readers had "participated in the Holy Spirit," and this could perhaps refer specifically to the gifts and miracles of 2:3-4. On the other hand, the "participation" of the readers was comprehensive and varied: they had experienced the "heavenly call" (3:1), "Christ" (3:14), the "Holy Spirit" (6:4 [cf. 10:29]), and the "Lord's discipline" (12:8). In summary, this expression gives us even more evidence for contending that these readers were, at the phenomenological level, converts to Jesus Christ. In the author's view, they have experienced the salvation that God offers through his Holy Spirit.

καλὸν γευσάμενους Θεοῦ ῥῆμα δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντες αἰῶνος ("who have tasted the good Word of God as well as the powers of the Age to Come"). Here we find that they have "experienced" (lit., "tasted") the good Word of God (cf. 1 Pet 2:3). In contrast to 1 Pet 2:3 where we find the term λόγος, in Hebrews the author uses ῥῆμα.<sup>98</sup> This term is used in 1:3 (Christ sustains the world by His Word); 11:3 (by faith we know that God established the world by the Word of God); and 12:19 (the children of Israel begged that no further Word be uttered from Sinai). The term ῥῆμα may refer to an "utterance" rather than the entire "Word";<sup>99</sup> thus, it would refer to their confession of the faith. At any rate, it is a Christian experience that is in view.

<sup>95</sup>Hohenstein: "to experience it [the heavenly gift] in the fullness of its sweet and saving power" ("Study," 438; the term "fullness" may go too far in the opposite direction). See Marshall, *Kept*, 142.

<sup>96</sup>To be applauded here are the observations of P. E. Hughes, whose system prefers a Calvinist understanding of the audience. He contends that the metaphorical use of the term refers to one's experiencing of something, not the degree of that experience. See *Hebrews*, 209.

<sup>97</sup>BAGD, 514.

<sup>98</sup>The use of καλὸν adds that the Word is perfect and excellent. So BAGD, 400.

<sup>99</sup>Westcott, *Hebrews*, 149; see also Hohenstein, "Study," 441-42, who sees a possible parallel to the comforting (but damning) words of God at Josh 21:45 and Zech 1:13.

"Powers of the age to come" pertains to the author's inaugurated eschatology (1:2); by their repentance (6:6) and faith (4:3), these readers had experienced the time of fulfillment and therefore a foretaste of the consummation.<sup>100</sup> Further, this expression may refer to their experience of the Holy Spirit—his gifts and miracles (2:3-4).<sup>101</sup> Once again, the author describes his readers, at the phenomenological level, as those who have participated in the age to come as it has been inaugurated through faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>102</sup> If the author is accurate in his description of the readers' experience, then we can only say that they are believers—true believers.

In light of the general context and the specific descriptions above, it can be said with reasonable probability that the author of Hebrews understood his readers to be Christians in the sense that they had made a credible confession of faith, had made early strides in perseverance, had experienced the several manifestations of the Holy Spirit, and had come to experience the age of fulfillment. They were, at the phenomenological level, converts to Jesus Christ.<sup>103</sup> It is simply unjustified to see in these descriptions anything but what is called regeneration in systematic theology.<sup>104</sup>

It can also be reasonably said that the author perceived his audience as "mixed." However, "mixed" means not that there were fraudulent and pretentious believers as compared to genuine believers. Rather, "mixed" describes a congregation composed of believers who will persevere and believers who will grow weary, faint, and abandon their former commitment publicly.

<sup>100</sup>On the eschatological make-up of the theology of Hebrews, see C. K. Barrett, "The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology: In Honour of Charles Harold Dodd* (ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube; Cambridge: University Press, 1964), 363-93; C. Hughes, *Hermeneutics*, 35-74; G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 572-77; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 27-29 (esp. 27-28 n. 211); Silva, "Perfection," 64-65; Rissi, *Theologie*, 125-30. I have been unable to locate a copy of B. Klappert, *Die Eschatologie des Hebräerbriefs* (Theologische Existenz heute 156; Munich: Kaiser, 1969).

<sup>101</sup>So P. E. Hughes, *Hebrews*, 211-12.

<sup>102</sup>M. Rissi: "Diese beiden Schilderungen [2:3-4; 6:4-5] des Anfangs reichen weit über allgemeine und traditionelle Darstellungen des Christenums hinaus, umschreiben vielmehr außergewöhnliche, wunderbare charismatische Erlebnisse" (*Theologie*, 6-7). BT: "Both of these two descriptions of the beginning [of Christian life] extend well beyond general and traditional presentations of the nature of the Christian life and describe more readily extraordinary and supernatural charismatic experiences."

<sup>103</sup>P. E. Hughes, *Hebrews*, 212: "they [the six descriptions] are but different aspects and manifestations of the one great blessing which the reception of the gospel brings." See also Marshall, *Kept*, 140-47.

<sup>104</sup>One suspects that if the "fall away" participle were not present a completely different reading of these descriptions would result. Indeed, if one used these descriptions neutrally most Christian congregations would unanimously think that regenerate Christians were in view. See above n. 83 on the definition of regeneration.

It is perhaps necessary here to respond to at least one of the main forms of the Calvinist side of the argument<sup>105</sup> as it impinges upon the readers or audience of the epistle.<sup>106</sup> So far as I have seen, Roger Nicole has offered the most studied presentation of the exegetical basis of the Calvinist interpretation, and so I will respond to his article.<sup>107</sup> In responding to Nicole, however, I do not presume to think that I have "undone" the entire Calvinist argument, and I do not mean to be disrespectful of a theological system that nurtured and continues to nurture me in my own faith. However, lines have been drawn and I must express a considered disagreement with my Calvinist friends at this juncture. Many Calvinists object when it is stated that salvation is either conditional or unconditional simply because, for some Calvinists, a form of conditionality and compatibilism is inherent to the biblical message. For our part, the issue becomes the conditionality inherent to the resistibility of grace once it has been genuinely experienced.

Due to a lack of space in this article, I must limit my response to brief comments, and readers are encouraged to read the article of Nicole in preparation for these several observations. First, it is one thing to be exposed to the light and another to "be enlightened" (p. 360). Nicole makes an exegetical mistake in moving from what is a possible meaning of an expression ("be enlightened" can perhaps mean simply "being exposed to something") to a conclusion that such is the meaning here without offering any evidence. In fact, he states, "Heb 6:4 may well refer to people who have been in close contact with the gospel, who may have taken some significant steps in professing acceptance of it, and who have then renounced their allegiance to it (cf. 2 Pet 2:19-21)" (p. 360). This is true, so far as it goes. Heb 6:4 may refer to such a group of people and it may not. The problem with Nicole's exegesis is that he moves from a

<sup>105</sup>The essence of the Calvinist argument is: (1) God is sovereign; (2) God sovereignly elects certain persons for salvation for his own purposes; (3) God sovereignly calls those whom he has elected; (4) those whom he calls are efficaciously converted—whether in a process or in a single-event; and (5) those whom God calls are sustained in perseverance by that divine election and calling. Notwithstanding variations in other details of the Calvinist argument, my response in this article is designed to test whether the fifth point is consistent with how the author presents perseverance. But, due to space limitations and my own scholarly interests, a more exhaustive taxonomy of, and interaction with, Calvinism is impossible.

<sup>106</sup>The commentary of P. E. Hughes (*Hebrews*, 206-22) is interesting in this regard. In my opinion, Hughes creates either considerable tension or an outright contradiction. On the one hand, he is quite objective with respect to the description of the audience in 6:4-6 but, on the other hand, he then contends that these people are simply not genuine believers. While he provides adequate evidence and argumentation to support his views on 6:4-6 in specifics, he provides virtually nothing by way of evidence with respect to the view that the readers are not genuine. The tension can be seen when pp. 206-12 are compared with pp. 221-22.

<sup>107</sup>Nicole ("Hebrews 6:4-6," 355-64) contends that those described in Heb 6:4-6 were not yet Christians. Reference to page numbers in Nicole's article will be made in the body of the text in what follows. See also Hughes, *Hebrews*, 221-22.

"may" to a probability without offering decisive evidence from Hebrews that "enlightened" means only "exposure."

Second, Nicole commits the common fallacy that so many Calvinists have committed: he argues that "to taste" and "to partake" mean partial participation (pp. 360, 361). Many recent Calvinist interpreters have jettisoned this conclusion as inconsonant with the historical evidence. However, Nicole argues that "more commonly" the term "taste" refers to "taking a small amount of food or drink so as to test whether it is suitable or pleasing" and refers, interestingly, to John 2:9 where the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine and noticed that it was substantially different. The decisive problem with Nicole's argument is easy to spot: he has used a questionable<sup>108</sup> example, one that is not metaphorical, and has argued on the basis of this one example to the "more common" use of the term. More evidence is required before his definition becomes standard. In addition, he fails to distinguish between literal and metaphorical uses when he cites evidence.

Besides the dubious discrimination between "full" and "partial" participation that Nicole argues for, he has clearly misread evidence pertaining to "partake" in the expression "shared in the Holy Spirit." First, Nicole acknowledges (p. 360) that the word μέτοχοι in this expression "appears to lend support to the view that true Christians are described here." He cites evidence that the term implies "a very close connection" (2:14; 3:1, 14; 5:13; 7:13). Second, Nicole contends that the term may refer to "mere companionship" (1:9) or to what he calls "external participation" and cites 12:8 and 1 Cor 10:21 to support this distinction between "close connections" and "loose connections." In response, it must be said that Nicole has no evidence whatsoever for thinking that μέτοχοι in 1:9 means "mere companionship."<sup>109</sup> The term "companionship" is appropriate but the word "mere" is a case of special pleading. The text says that Jesus, God's Son, was "anointed with the oil of gladness above his companions." Nicole's use of the term "mere" is irresponsible. The degree of connection between Jesus and his companions is not in the purview of the author at all.

Furthermore, Nicole's appeal to 12:8 and 1 Cor 10:21 is odd at best. Heb 12:8 reads: "If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline) . . . ." The last clause contains the Greek word upon which Nicole rests his argument; in Greek it reads ἵς μέτοχοι γεγόνασιν πάντες. We might translate it thus: "of which [discipline] all [sons of God] have become participants." I am

<sup>108</sup>There is no evidence that the master tasted this wine here in order to test its suitability; rather, he tasted it and noticed its potency. His definition is not demonstrated in any lexicon I have seen. The Greek term means "to taste."

<sup>109</sup>Oberholtzer ("Warning 1," 89-90) concludes just the opposite, saying that the Hebrew term behind μέτοχος (*haber*) refers to "one who has a close bond with another person" (emphasis mine) and the Greek term, he argues, describes "close association" (emphasis mine).

befuddled how Nicole can somehow argue that this refers to "external participation." He must think that these "pretentious frauds," since they are not real believers, have somehow participated only "externally" in the discipline of God. But this explanation completely misses the point: the author is stating that the Lord disciplines all of his sons. Thus, each son participates in God's discipline. The degree of participation has nothing whatsoever to do with the author's statements. If Nicole thinks these people are not genuine believers then Heb 12:8 says nothing about them because 12:8 is talking only about genuine believers. And his appeal to 1 Cor 10:21 is very similar. Paul says that "you cannot have a part [μετέχευ] in both the Lord's table and the table of demons." Again, the degree of participation (internal vs. external) is completely beside the point and is an angle on the text for which there is no support. Paul is saying that participation cannot take place in both directions. Again, the Greek word is being used in both Heb 12:8 and 1 Cor 10:21 metaphorically to describe participation, genuine participation at that, but the degree of that participation is not in view. Thus, we can argue that Nicole's evidence for his view of μέτοχοι does not support the necessary distinction he needs to draw to support his Calvinist reading of the warning passage in Heb 6:4-6.<sup>110</sup>

Third, he argues that "tasting the powers of the world to come" "could refer to people who have received 'eternal life', but it may equally well describe people who had been in contact with the supernatural power of the gospel" (p. 361), and he appeals to Matt 11:20; Mark 9:1; Luke 17:21 and Matt 7:22, 23. The problem here is obvious: Nicole has moved from "could refer" to "may equally well describe" and sides with the latter without offering evidence from Hebrews. Without trying to be harsh, I must point out that what Nicole has done here is to find evidence that will support what he wants this text to say. Not one of the references cited refers to the idea "taste," although they do describe people who have seen Jesus' and others' miracles that are direct manifestations of the inauguration of the kingdom. If that is what it means "to taste the powers of the age to come" then Nicole has not proven it by offering evidence that the metaphor "taste" is connected with outside involvement in the miraculous.

Fourth, Nicole acknowledges that the description of the audience of Heb 6:4-6 as having repented (cf. "restore again to repentance") "confront[s] us with greater difficulties than any of the other seven descriptions" (p. 361). He offers two possible explanations: one from John Owen that distinguishes between genuine (regenerative) internal repentance and external repentance; and another from William Gouge that speaks of a professed state

<sup>110</sup>Cf. Michel, *Hebräerbrief*, 242 n. 5 ("μέτοχος kann sich im Hebr nur mit einer besonderen Würde, mit einer wichtigen Gabe verbinden"; ET: "μέτοχος can only be connected in Hebrews to a special honor, to an important gift").



as distinguished from God's perception of their state. Nicole then states: "Neither of these explanations appears entirely free of difficulty, *although one may prefer to have recourse to them rather than to be forced to the conclusion that regenerate individuals may be lost*" (p. 361; italics mine). Besides quibbling with his willingness to avoid a satisfactory solution to what he admits is the biggest problem (which is methodologically irresponsible),<sup>111</sup> I want to voice a methodological shock about the words in italics. What Nicole is saying is that he prefers an explanation that is extremely difficult (and I would say "impossible") over giving up his theological position! This is a confession of eisegesis, not responsible exegesis.<sup>112</sup> I am not arguing that one's larger theological syntheses ought never to influence one's reading of specific texts—for they inevitably will and do. The issue is which has the priority. What I am saying is two-fold: (1) our theology ought to be challenged and reformulated as a result of our exegesis and in light of those exegetical conclusions; and (2) we need to admit when our theological constructions are at odds with a text's apparent reading and so construct our synthesis in a way that incorporates exegetical conclusions that may be more plausible.

Finally, he states: "Our examination makes it apparent that the elements of the description given in Heb. while not incompatible with true salvation, do not, nevertheless, either

<sup>111</sup>No one can be forgiven this in any kind of intellectual or scientific endeavor. If a certain problem is paramount for a theory to explain the data adequately, then no solution can be seriously entertained until that major problem has its probable resolution.

<sup>112</sup>See the trenchant remarks of C. R. Schoonhoven with regard to systematic theologians and exegetes who proceed in a similar manner ("Analogy of Faith," 93-94, 97, 105, 108-9). At one point he summarizes: "And here is the nub of the problem. The Reformation and later theologians were so intent on obliterating the 'works' idea of the Roman Church that they read the texts in such way as to conform to what they falsely regarded as radical grace theology, a grace with no conditions attached whatever." One upshot, I suggest, of this post-Reformation departure from balanced biblical teaching is the virtual impossibility of finding room for the teachings of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount, or books like James within the system of thought. A clear result of a balanced perspective on the biblical conditionality of salvation is that the demands of the whole Bible (from Moses to Revelation) are unified into a single whole. One hermeneutical approach that moves in this direction, though not without its problems, can be seen in D. P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

A weakness similar to Nicole's can be found in P. E. Hughes (*Hebrews*, 221): "Finally, when the redeeming blood of Christ is applied by the Holy Spirit to the very heart of a man's being, it is a work of God that cannot fail. This means that those who are genuinely Christ's do not fall away into apostasy. Where there is work of God . . . that work, simply because it is God's work, cannot fail to achieve its purpose in accordance with the divine will" (the first two sets of italicized words are mine). Here, by definition and in the face of the evidence that would disprove his assumption, he excludes the reading that would lead to a completely different definition. Similar presuppositions bias the exegesis of Toussaint (cf. "Eschatology," 67) and the essays of Oberholtzer ("Warning").

singly or jointly, necessarily imply regeneration" (p. 362).<sup>113</sup> This word "necessarily" reveals the approach of Nicole. Any exegete knows that there are no *necessary* interpretations and exegeses because necessity is impossible to attain when one is dealing with induction and historical probabilities. He's right. These texts do not "necessarily imply regeneration." Further, no texts do. It is not hard to show that any interpretation is unnecessary, as anyone knows who has played the "devil's advocate." Nicole's logic has been that since the texts do not necessarily demand regeneration then they do not mean regeneration. He has forced a text to be guilty until it can prove itself innocent. Turned on its head, I could counter, his view is not the necessary reading of the text, because surely there is room for some doubt about whether regeneration is in view.<sup>114</sup> What is needed is a reasoned examination of the evidence that leads to the most probable explanation. In sum, Nicole's arguments are both rooted in a methodological fallacy and exegetically unsound. For these reasons, a major presentation of the Calvinist argument can be said to be in need of revision.

If Nicole's view that the verses are not describing genuine believers is found in need of more careful support, then perhaps another Calvinist rendering may be more probable. Are there any? Recently, V. D. Verbrugge has argued that 6:4-8 do not describe individual members of the church but local covenant communities.<sup>115</sup> Verbrugge's argument is clear, and he shows an obvious enthusiasm for its potential. His essential argument derives from the illustration found at 6:7-8 which, he argues, stems from Isa 5:1-7 (he also appeals to Deut 11:26-28; 28-30). The major conclusion he draws is that, since Isa 5:1-7 is concerned not with individual Israelites but with Israel as a nation, then it follows that the extension of this parable into the new covenant also applies not to individuals but also to local covenant communities. His view is stimulating and fresh. Furthermore, it attacks what is at the heart of a great deal of Western interpreters: rabid individualism.<sup>116</sup> Ironically, however, his whole article is designed to protect an individual view of salvation!

<sup>113</sup>So also, p. 360; his method is clearly revealed in the following statement: Calvinists "must be prepared to show that none of them [the expressions of 6:4-8] singly, nor all of them jointly, necessarily implies regeneration" (emphasis mine). The same point obtains: it would not be hard to do what he asks and, I add, demonstrating his point would not necessarily be the most probable rendering of the verses in question.

<sup>114</sup>E.g., I could argue that since this text does not necessarily teach the salvation is unconditional (which is more than reasonable) then salvation is not unconditional.

<sup>115</sup>See his "New Interpretation."

<sup>116</sup>See the useful categorical definitions of the differences between our culture and the ancient Mediterranean world in B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 51-70; see also the chart in his *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1988) 145-51.

But Verbrugge's essay will not stand up against careful scrutiny of Hebrews and, in particular, against a synthetic approach to the warning passages. First, there are clear cases of individualism in Hebrews. When the author turns from the apostasy of the old covenant people he says, "See to it, brothers, that *none of you* has a sinful, unbelieving heart" (3:12). Here is the clear use of a partitive genitive: "none" is smaller than "you" and the "none" clearly denotes individuals. Similarly, at 4:1 he says, "let us be careful that *none of you* be found to have fallen short of it."<sup>117</sup> Again, the entire second warning passage appears to be concerned with individual apostasy (cf. 3:13, 17, 18; 4:3, 10, 11). When the author gives a concrete illustration of an inability to repent, he gives an example of an individual, not an example of a group (12:16-17).

Second, the agricultural illustration of Heb 6:7-8 is very common in the ancient Mediterranean world, and the parallels to Isa 5:1-7, though possible, are at best inexact and incomplete. Isaiah 5 is very specific, and the wording of Heb 6:7-8 is general.<sup>118</sup> Third, perhaps the biggest obstacle to Verbrugge's interpretation is that the exhortation in Hebrews is to perseverance, and when the author gives examples of what perseverance is he lists individuals, not covenant communities (11:1-40). The logic of 11:39-40 and 12:1-3 is that these examples are precise illustrations of what he has in mind for them—and thus we are led to think of individuals. Finally, the apostasy passages themselves evince a concern with individuals falling away (10:28-29); if it is the case that in the old covenant an individual who disobeyed the law was punished, so it is clearly the case for an individual in the new covenant. Verbrugge's view, then, is an inadequate solution.<sup>119</sup>

To sum up this section: I have tried to show that the author of Hebrews is exhorting his readers to a persevering faithfulness to God and his revelation of the new covenant in Jesus Christ. Second, I have argued that the warning the author is most concerned about is one that involves the drastic consequences of eternal damnation if a person does not persevere in the faith. Third, I have argued that the sin he is concerned about is very specific: it is apostasy, a deliberate and public act of deconfessing Jesus Christ, a rejection of God's Spirit, and a refusal to submit to God and His will for persons. Finally, I have argued that the evidence of Hebrews suggests that the readers were believers, people who at the phenomenological level had converted to Jesus Christ. Underlying all this argumentation was a methodological approach to the issues found in the warning passages in Hebrews. I have argued that it is best to study the warning passages together and to sift the evidence

<sup>117</sup>See also 12:15. Heb 10:25 may be seen similarly, though the plural could be rendered (by Verbrugge) as indicating a group separation.

<sup>118</sup>See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 172 nn. 69-74, for the evidence and confirmation of this criticism.

<sup>119</sup>See also H. Feld, "Der Hebräerbrief," 3584-85; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 172 n. 69.

synthetically in our attempts to understand the different components of the warning passages.

It remains for me now to conclude this discussion by examining the nature of salvation in Hebrews as an integral aspect of the assumptions behind the warning passages.

## VII. THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

I suspect that the expressions "losing one's salvation" and "conditional salvation" are the most distasteful expressions used in the debate between Calvinists and Arminians. I also suspect that "losing one's faith" is much more acceptable to the same palate since it seems more congenial to religious affections and is consonant with what many of us have seen when someone deserts the faith. I am contending that the book of Hebrews does teach conditional salvation but that the condition is a condition taught throughout the whole Bible. Furthermore, I am arguing that the *only* sin the author sees as capable of destroying a genuine believer's faith is the sin of apostasy. No other sin is in view and all other sins are capable of God's forgiveness. God chooses, for his own reasons, not to shower his endless grace upon the apostate. But a foundation upon which the author builds his argument about the conditionality of salvation is his understanding of salvation. To a brief survey of this doctrine in Hebrews I now turn.

First, we need to observe that the book of Hebrews is to be understood in a salvation-historical format, and the category of inaugurated eschatology is fundamental to its proper interpretation (1:2; 9:26).<sup>120</sup> As we find in the Gospels and the life of Jesus, signs and miracles are evidence of the Kingdom's manifestation (2:4; 6:5). In addition, those who turn to the new covenant find the forgiveness of sins in the here and now (9:13-14, 26-28; 10:12) through an all-sufficient, perfect sacrificial offering (9:12; 10:14, 19). Another image exploited by our author is that those who turn to Jesus for salvation also find direct access to God (4:16; 10:22). Those who participate in the new covenant experience the powers of the age to come (6:5) because these believers participate in the "new order" (9:9-10). Furthermore, this kingdom is permanent since it is eternal (12:28). For our author, the old covenant is now passé; God has spoken finally in his Son (1:1-2). And yet, the salvation that is experienced now is not the consummated salvation envisioned as a glorious kingdom. The kingdom has only been inaugurated; salvation has only been inaugurated. In fact, the futurity of salvation is a major stress of our author.

Second, as many scholars have observed,<sup>121</sup> for the author of Hebrews, salvation is primarily (though not exclusively; see

<sup>120</sup>See n. 100 above.

<sup>121</sup>So Käsemann, *Wandering*, 26-37; G. Hughes, *Hermeneutics*, 66-74. The latter also points out that futurist eschatology predominates in the warning passage

above) a state of affairs between God and humans that pertains to the future (1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9; 9:28), and faith is largely centered upon the promise of the heavenly, unseen, and future order (11:1).<sup>122</sup> This futurist dimension of salvation is especially heavy in the warning passages.

This note of future salvation is sounded early in Hebrews. At 2:8 we read that "at present we do not see everything subject to him," with the clear implication that there is coming a time when all will be subject to Jesus. Although the precise meaning of the "rest" has been debated,<sup>123</sup> many today agree that it is an image of "salvation," of final repose. As such, it confirms the essential futurity of salvation in Hebrews for, while the believer enters the rest now (4:2-3), that rest is only fully entered into in the future (4:1). In fact, the text exhorts the readers to "make every effort to enter that rest," clearly implying that part of the rest is still future.

The foundation of the author's exhortations throughout Hebrews to persevere is that there is coming a Day of Judgment<sup>124</sup> that will discriminate between perseverers and apostates (10:25-31). For our author, that judgment will take place on the Day when God grants his reward (11:6, 26)<sup>125</sup> and salvation to his faithful people, when they will be resurrected (6:2). They will inherit

while realized eschatology predominates in the doctrinal sections. This bipolarity reflects, he argues, the nature of Christian existence. See also Marshall, *Kept*, 138; Toussaint, "Eschatology," 68-70. Oberholtzer (especially in "Warning 1," 92-93) emphasizes the futurity of salvation but mistakenly construes *omnino* to mean only millennial kingdom. Rather than investigating how the author uses the term "salvation," Oberholtzer investigates the meaning of the Hebrew term behind "salvation" (without warrant, for 1:14 where *omnino* first occurs, is not from the OT), determines that it frequently refers to physical deliverance, assumes that the exhortation of 2:1-4 could suggest salvation by works, then argues that "salvation" in 1:14 and 2:3 therefore means the millennial kingdom and the works pertain to rewards and authority in the millennium. In such a manner the author escapes from revising his theology but misses, I think, the meaning of "salvation" in Hebrews.

<sup>122</sup>On 1:1, cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 307-11; Hurst, *Epistle*, 121-22; Dautenberg, "Glaube," 163-66, 169-71; Rissi, *Theologie*, 107-8; O. Betz, "Firmness in Faith: Hebrews 11:1 and Isaiah 28:16," in *Scripture: Meaning and Method. Essays Presented to Anthony Tyrrell Hanson* (ed. B. P. Thompson; Hull: Hull University Press, 1987) 92-113.

<sup>123</sup>On rest, cf. Käsemann, *Wandering*, 67-75. O. Hofius criticizes Käsemann's use of gnostic materials, and argues in favor of an apocalyptic view; cf. *Katapsusis: Die Vorstellung vom endzeitlichen Ruhestat im Hebräerbrief* (WUNT 11; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1970). Attridge (*Hebrews*, 126-28) rightly, I think, concludes that "the imagery of rest is best understood as a complex symbol for the whole soteriological process that Hebrews never fully articulates, but which involves both personal and corporate dimensions" (p. 128). See also Toussaint, "Eschatology," 70-74 (millennium); Oberholtzer, "Warning 2," 190-92 (millennium); Rissi, *Theologie*, 18-19.

<sup>124</sup>See Schoonhoven, "Analogy of Faith," 103-6; Rissi, *Theologie*, 126-27; L. L. Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960); A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 253-64.

<sup>125</sup>See Schoonhoven, "Analogy of Faith," 100-102.

(1:14; 9:15 and 4:1; 6:17; 8:6; 9:15; 10:36)<sup>126</sup> on that Day a heavenly place (11:10, 16; 12:22-28) that was their hope (6:11; 7:19; 10:23).

This final salvation is achieved through the perfect sacrifice of Christ (cf. 7:11, 19; 9:9, 11; 10:1, 14). Put differently, Jesus' salvation provides for the final, eschatological perfection<sup>127</sup> of the people of God (10:14; 11:40; 12:23). The language of perfection in Hebrews speaks of bringing believers to their intended goal as worshipers who draw near to God as an obedient people<sup>128</sup> and is thus very close to the notion of glorification (cf. esp. 12:2).<sup>129</sup> Perhaps 9:28 expresses it best: "and he [Christ] will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him." It is not surprising then to discover that the author, like many biblical writers, ties faith to hope.<sup>130</sup>

Even if the grammar of 3:6b, 14 is difficult, here again the futurity of full salvation is clear: "And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" (3:6b). We are (or will be) his house finally only if we retain our fidelity. At 3:14 we read, "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first (3:14)."<sup>131</sup> In these two conditional expressions<sup>132</sup> we have a contingent element ("sharing in Christ," "being his house") based upon persevering faith ("if we hold on to our courage and the hope," "if we hold firmly till the end the confidence"). Perseverance in faith issues into future, final salvation. In each of these there is a present reality, the continuance of which is dependent upon perseverance. If that person does not persevere, there will be a cessation of that former reality. But again, salvation is seen as a future state in these two conditional sentences.

The scheme of our author appears to be the following:

Past	Present	Future
INAUGURATED	SALVATION	FINAL
Conversion	Perseverance	Salvation

<sup>126</sup>See Käsemann, *Wandering*, 32-37.

<sup>127</sup>On perfection, which has cultic, moral, soteriological, and eschatological overtones, cf. Peterson, *Perfection*, 1-20, 126-67; Spicq, *Hébreux*, 2:214-25 (who emphasizes sensitivity to meaning for each context); A. Wikgren, "Patterns of Perfection in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *NTS* 6 (1959-60) 159-67 (who emphasizes the salvation-historical nature of perfection); Rissi, *Theologie*, 102-3 (who emphasizes a realized eschatology perspective); Silva, "Perfection." On the importance of 10:14, cf. Michel, *Hebräerbrief*, 145-46, 341; Peterson, *Perfection*, 147-53; C. Hughes, *Hermeneutics*, 32-34.

<sup>128</sup>Notice how "drawing near" and perseverance are closely related at 10:19-25. See N. Dahl, "A New and Living Way: The Approach to God According to Hebrews 10:19-25," *Int* 5 (1951) 401-12; Rissi, *Theologie*, 97-100, 102-3.

<sup>129</sup>See esp. Silva, "Perfection"; Rissi, *Theologie*, 102.

<sup>130</sup>See also Dautenberg, "Glaube," 163-64; Rissi, *Theologie*, 113-14.

<sup>131</sup>See Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 269.

<sup>132</sup>Word order suggests that the term "proviso" is a good description of these two sentences.

Only those who, having experienced the entrance into salvation, also progress through the present with persevering faith will inherit the promise (6:12; 9:15; 10:36; 11:39)<sup>133</sup> of salvation held out as God's reward. Thus, for the author, salvation, though experienced now in its inaugurated form, is something reserved for God's persevering people until the return of Jesus Christ (9:28).

But what about the pastoral implication of "losing one's salvation"? In light of the futurity of salvation in Hebrews it is reasonable to contend that one cannot in fact "lose one's salvation," since one has not yet acquired it. One cannot lose what one does not in fact have. But perhaps we are playing semantics here. Perhaps we should say that we can "lose" the present dimensions of salvation that have already been inaugurated and experienced (6:4-5; 10:14; 12:22-24). But, we certainly need to be careful of what we are saying if we say that the author of Hebrews states that we can "lose salvation" because, for him, salvation is largely a future state of affairs. In light of his hesitancy to apply the term to the present time, it is perhaps wisest for us to avoid its use in this sense. Rather, I think it is wisest to say that those who are phenomenologically believers can "lose their faith" and the enjoyment of God's salvation that persevering faith would have made possible for them.

And what about fear, fear of losing one's salvation? First, the only sin that can separate the believer from final salvation is the sin of apostasy. The warning passages, as our synthesis above showed, are not concerned with the problem of sin in the everyday existence of believers—except in the important sense that habits and patterns may lead one to apostasy. Instead, they are more directly concerned with the sin of massive consequences: the sin of apostasy. Someone need only fear the loss of salvation if one is convinced that he or she has apostasized. Second, the evidence suggests that those who have committed this sin are not in fact worried about it or fearful of having committed it. The evidence suggests, on the contrary, that they are proud of it; they are boastful of their defiance of God's will. Third, our pastoral duty to those who are fearful of their security is both to urge them to press on to maturity (6:1) and to instruct them in the perfect sacrificial system that Jesus Christ has provided (3:1-10:39). The Son of God has come at the last of times (1:2), and he is more than adequate; the Son's sacrifice is perfect and will cleanse our consciences. Because of who he is and the effectiveness of his ministry, we can be assured that God is satisfied with what the Son has done. Assurance, however, should not be given lightheartedly and no one should be assured of salvation in the context of a careless life-

<sup>133</sup>See Käsemann, *Wandering*, 26-37.

style.<sup>134</sup> Our only fear needs to be that holy fear that reverberates throughout the pages of the Bible: the holy fear that drives us to work out our own salvation (cf. Phil 2:12; Heb 10:31; 12:28-29).

In Hebrews, final salvation is not unconditional. It is conditional, and that single condition is persevering faith. The debate between theological options will inevitably go on and it would be foolhardy for me to think that I have done anything but offer an alternative to a Calvinist rendering of Hebrews. But Hebrews offers some important teachings that will help us construct our theology, especially as we construct the relationship of final salvation to the condition of present Christian living.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>134</sup>On this matter of assurance, see Shank, *Life*, 301-5; J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: Salvation, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 119-36; from the Reformed side, see L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 545-49. Berkhof alludes to a view of Augustine which is similar to the one argued in this article.

<sup>135</sup>I am particularly grateful to my graduate assistant, Matt Williams, for his help in assembling the bibliography for this article and to two of my classes in which most of the ideas in this article were formed. Those classes are NT 612, Hebrews, the General Epistles, and the Johannine Literature and NT 704, Advanced Greek Exegesis. In addition, several scholars took time from their busy schedules to comment on an earlier draft of this article and their ideas, queries, and suggestions have influenced the present shape of the article. I express my indebtedness to David Peterson (Moore Theological College), Moisés Silva (Westminster Theological Seminary), and to two of my colleagues at Trinity: D. A. Carson and D. L. Larsen.