

## 9. Pastoral problems

### 5:11–6:8

It must be plain to us already that the author of our letter has compassionate pastoral concern. Physically he is at some distance from this church and longs to come to them (13:23), but spiritually he is as close to them as he can possibly be. In this section we have another parenthesis or digression, a further pastoral ‘aside’. At the end of 5:10 he has stated that the eternal priesthood of the Lord Jesus is ‘after the order of Melchizedek’. His reference to this Old Testament character leads him to reflect on this congregation’s inability to benefit by the ‘solid food’ of deep Christian teaching. So he digresses to discuss three closely related spiritual problems confronting some of his readers. In studying these verses we shall find that we are considering issues which have a strangely modern ring about them.

#### 1. The problem of ignorance (5:11–14)

The writer of Hebrews is convinced that his readers’ ignorance stems from laziness (5:11). How can he begin to explain what it means for Christ’s priesthood to be ‘after the order of Melchizedek’ when they have lost their appetite for Christian truth? Instead of giving their best mind to sound doctrine and its practical application, many of these early Christian readers have become dull of hearing. The word really means ‘sluggish’; it is used in the Septuagint of ‘slothful men’ who refuse to tackle hard work, and occurs again later in this letter describing ‘sluggish’ people who need a good shake-up (6:12). It here describes those who develop a ‘couldn’t care less’ attitude to the study of holy Scripture, and have failed to give themselves to a regular, methodical, and painstaking study of its teaching and its relevance in everyday life.

Secondly, he has observed that their ignorance has led to ineffectiveness (5:12). Turning their backs on strenuous study and diligent application to spiritual teaching, they remain like babies when they ought to be adults, pupils when they might be instructors, Christians in need of help when they could be offering it to others. Paul says something similar about the Corinthians.<sup>1</sup> It is not merely that they do not benefit personally but, even more serious, other people are denied the help which they might

have received from them had they been strong and resourceful believers.

Thirdly, he knows that spiritual ignorance results in carelessness <sup>✎</sup> (5:13–14). The people who have not begun to master the ABC of the Christian life (first principles, cf. 6:1) can hardly hope to enrich the lives of others. Their own faith is far too insecure to be able to communicate confidence and assurance to other people. They cry for babies' milk when they ought to have passed on to a more varied and substantial diet. But what is most serious about their spiritual ignorance is that, being unfamiliar with God's word, they do not know his mind on important doctrinal, ethical and spiritual issues. His truth is a word of righteousness and those who master its message learn how to distinguish good from evil <sup>✎</sup>. This does not come to anybody without effort. These spiritual *faculties* have to be trained (*gegymnasmena*) as in a gymnasium,<sup>2</sup> an idea that returns later in the epistle (12:11), also in the context of discipline.

These Jewish Christians had certainly not intended to get into this indolent, useless state, but this is clearly what has happened to them. When he says that their spiritual hearing has *become* dull, he uses the perfect tense; it describes the abiding result of a past act. However well intentioned they may have been at the beginning, this is what they have allowed themselves to become. It is a warning no believer can ignore. Many people casually drift into a low standard of Christian life simply because they minimize the importance of Christian instruction and disciplined Bible study <sup>✎</sup>. Quite possibly on most days they quietly ponder a few verses and say a quick prayer, but it does not occur to them that this is not nearly enough. Failing to acknowledge their need of it, they slowly lose their desire for it. Somehow or other, however busy he or she may be, every Christian needs to find a regular opportunity for serious study of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The problem of immaturity (6:1–3)

'Solid food is for the mature' (5:14). Ignorance leads to immaturity. First, we must

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 3:1–2.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Tim. 4:7; cf. 2 Pet. 2:14.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Graham Claydon, *Time with God* (IVP, 1979), and Bible study courses such as P. Lee, G. Scharf and R. Willcox, *Food for Life* (IVP, 1977) and A. M. Stibbs (editor), *Search the Scriptures* (IVP, 1967).

establish ourselves in *the elementary doctrine of Christ* and then acquire an appetite for the more solid food (5:12) of other aspects of Christian teaching. We must *go on to maturity*. The solid foundation of Christian truth is of immense importance but, once that is well and truly laid, there is no need to go on repeating that process, *laying again* a further foundation. Six basic aspects of Christian teaching are enumerated here. They may well have been regarded in this particular church as the essential features of catechetical instruction for young converts.

#### a. *Repentance from dead works*

The message of repentance was an essential aspect of the teaching of John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus, and the apostles.<sup>4</sup> When, through his servant John, Christ gave his final message to the church, he called upon his people to repent.<sup>5</sup> In many New Testament contexts he call is to repent by turning from personal sin, but here, doubtless because of its Jewish background, the call is to repent from *dead works*, from man's futile attempt at self-salvation .

#### b. *Faith in God*

Merely to leave *dead works* is not likely to accomplish anything; it is a purely negative act. The positive aspect of faith demands forceful emphasis. It is *repentance from and faith towards* . Paul says a similar thing when summarizing his evangelistic ministry in mid-first-century Ephesus.<sup>6</sup> Repentance and faith are inseparable elements of the Christian gospel. It is not only that the old has to be abandoned; the new must be appropriated .

#### c. *Baptism or washings*

Technically the term is in the plural, *baptisms*; possibly a reference to the importance of correct teaching about baptism, especially in view of the variety of teaching which is reflected even in the New Testament. For example, the difference between John's

<sup>4</sup> Mk. 1:4, 14–15; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31.

<sup>5</sup> Rev 2:5, 16, 22; 3:3, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Acts. 20:21.

baptism and Christian baptism might well have troubled young Jewish converts to Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Or it could be a reference to religious washings prevalent among Jews, and the essential difference between these lustrations, or ablutions (it is the same word as in 9:10) and the ‘one baptism’ of the Christian church.<sup>8</sup>

*d. Laying on of hands*

This simple form of Hebrew prayer symbolism became part of the Christian initiatory rite.<sup>9</sup> It was obviously related to the gift of the Holy Spirit. The reference here may even be to ordination for ministry.<sup>10</sup>

*e. Resurrection of the dead*

One gets the impression from 1 Corinthians 15 that some first-century Christian congregations had difficulties about the resurrection and its highly important implications for believers. The particular churches known to our writer believed in good teaching about the future. Death is not the end; it merely marks the physical conclusion of our only opportunity to live for God in *this* world. For believers, the best of all is yet to be.

*f. Eternal judgment*

‘It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment’ (9:27). Resurrection and judgment were clearly linked in the teaching of Jesus and in early Christian doctrine.<sup>11</sup> The future implications of the faith were an essential aspect of early Christian instruction. The doctrinal and spiritual importance of all these topics cannot be denied, but the author regards these foundational truths as *basic* Christian knowledge. It has been observed by some scholars that these six *elementary doctrines* can be paralleled in Judaism. Perhaps some of these first-century readers were retreating back into these aspects of faith which, in some measure, Christians had in common

<sup>7</sup> Acts 18:25; 19:1–5.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 8:36; 9:18; 10:47–48; Eph. 4:5.

<sup>9</sup> Nu. 27:18–19, 23; Dt. 34:9; Mk. 6:5; Acts 8:17–19; 19:6.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim. 1:6.

<sup>11</sup> Jn. 5:26–29; Acts 17:31.

with their Jewish neighbours. To *go on to maturity*, these believers must develop an appetite for more ‘solid food’ (5:12, 14) which their leaders have endeavoured faithfully to impart in the past (13:7) and which our author intends to expound in the remaining chapters of his letter.

### 3. The problem of apostasy (6:4–8)

There are clear hints at this point and elsewhere in the letter that doctrinal ignorance and spiritual immaturity have led to serious disasters in this church. Some believers, who made an apparently excellent beginning in their Christian lives, are now not merely chronic invalids or spiritual casualties, but have become fierce opponents of the Christian gospel. Understandably, some members of this church may have become worried about the destiny of apostates, and the writer finds it necessary in the course of his pastoral involvement to say something about those who have not only drifted away (2:1), or fallen away (3:12), but have with hardened hearts (3:12–13) become active rebels against the way and work of Christ. In describing these sad apostates the letter mentions three characteristic features: they despise God’s gifts, they reject God’s Son, and they forfeit God’s blessing <sup>12</sup>.

#### a. They despise God’s gifts (6:4–5)

Long before their fall, these apostates had been the eager recipients of God’s generous bounty. For one thing, they had received the gift of *his transforming light*. At the beginning of their Christian lives they had been miraculously and mercifully *enlightened*.<sup>12</sup> The bright light of Christ’s illuminating presence had shone into every dark corner of their hearts and minds. Were they now returning to the dark, deliberately choosing a Christless way of life?<sup>13</sup>

They had also received the gift of *his enriching provision*. All the blessings of heaven had been theirs to take and taste,<sup>14</sup> to receive and enjoy. At one time, possibly years before, they had ‘experienced how good the gospel is’ (Moffatt). It is interesting that the

<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor. 4:4, 6; Eph. 1:18.

<sup>13</sup> Jn. 3:19–21.

<sup>14</sup> Ps. 34:8.

metaphor of light is followed by that of food.<sup>15</sup> Jesus is the gift of God sent from heaven. He had been like manna in the wilderness, essential sustenance for the journey, the only satisfying ‘food’ of life.<sup>16</sup> Once they had delighted in such goodness; now they could only despise it. Once that spiritual appetite is lost, how difficult it is for someone to be brought to repentance.

Furthermore, they had received the gift of *his enabling Spirit*. Once we come to Christ we become *partakers*, or ‘sharers’, in the Holy Spirit. By God’s astonishing generosity these believers had become ‘sharers’ of the Spirit’s life, participants in the Spirit’s work, and partakers of the Spirit’s gifts. Yet now they forcefully and totally disown this ‘Spirit of grace’ (10:29). It was through his persuasive ministry that they had been brought to repentance and faith in the first place. How can they hope to amend their ways and be led back to God if they reject the only one who can bring them home?

In the past these believers had also received the gift of *his incomparable word*. They had *tasted the goodness of the word of God*. More than once we have noticed how important the word of God is to the author of this letter. So far every chapter in the epistle has had something to say about holy Scripture and our response to it. But now these apostates no longer see Christ in the pages of the Old Testament, or continue to hear him speak through the treasured reminiscences of his own life story, or through the inspired teachings and writings of his apostles. Once to have ‘escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’ and then completely and consistently to spurn him, surely makes a renewed repentance impossible. There is no other way by which sinful people can return to God but by Christ.<sup>17</sup>

These apostates had, in earlier days, received the gift of *his strengthening power*. They had experienced in their own lives *the powers of the age to come*. The mighty powers (*dynameis*) of another world had broken in upon their weak lives, transforming their frailty into adequacy, their impotence into strength. To have been ‘sharers’ in the Holy Spirit’s work was to have received his incomparable word and experienced his unrivalled power. And now they had trampled these treasures beneath their feet. Peter

<sup>15</sup> 1 Pet. 2:3, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Jn. 6:27, 31–35, 47–51.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Pet. 2:20; Heb. 10:20; Jn. 14:6.

says it would have been better for such rebellious apostates ‘never to have known the way of righteousness’.<sup>18</sup> This letter says it is quite impossible to restore such people to repentance if they commit apostasy. Of their own stubborn volition they have set themselves against the only one who can bring them back. They have abandoned his way, despised his truth, and spurned his life. Whilst such persistent hostility is maintained, genuine repentance is certainly impossible. Apostasy of this kind sets up a form of spiritual atrophy. As F. F. Bruce says, ‘God has pledged Himself to pardon all who truly repent, but Scripture and experience alike suggest that it is possible for human beings to arrive at a state of heart and life where they can no longer repent.’

*b. They reject God’s Son (6:6)*

Once, they turned to the cross of Christ in anguish and found in the moment of their overwhelming guilt a pardon too wonderful for words. Like the first followers of Christ, they proclaimed the Lord Jesus as their only Saviour and Lord. But now they denounce him and *hold him up to contempt*, as did the lawless and godless mob who derided him on that first Good Friday. This highly compressed verse indicates the seriousness of their offence. They disown his deity. It is *the Son of God* they are crucifying afresh, the Son who reveals the Father and sustains the universe. Moreover, they do not simply refuse to subscribe to an essential aspect of Christian belief; they abuse Christ. They despise his beauty. They *hold him up to contempt*, publicly rejecting the one who had given his life for their redemption. Having once adored and worshipped shipped him, they now view him as the priests, scribes and crowds did at his passion, as one ‘despised and rejected by men’.<sup>19</sup>

*c. They forfeit God’s blessing (6:7–8)*

The author brings this pastoral warning to a close by using a vivid parable drawn from agricultural life and probably dependent on familiar Old Testament Scripture. [Deuteronomy 29:18–28](#) describes the fate of anyone who ‘turns away ... from the Lord our God’. Such a person walks in the stubbornness of his heart and produces ‘a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit’. An apostate of this kind cannot be pardoned, his sin

<sup>18</sup> [2 Pet. 2:21](#).

<sup>19</sup> [Is. 53:3](#).



being likened to ‘a burnt-out waste, unsown, and growing nothing, where no grass can sprout’. Or it could be an oblique reference to the highly relevant prophetic word in [Isaiah 5:1–7](#), the story of a vineyard which, because it failed to produce the expected fruit, was ‘trampled down’ and made a waste where ‘briars and thorns shall grow up’. The parable which concludes this section confronts the reader with a stark choice. The suggestion is that both types of land, good and bad, genuine and apostate, have received *the rain that often falls upon it*. The blessings of God’s rich goodness have come to both, but one produces useful vegetation and *receives a blessing from God*, whilst the other bears only useless and even harmful thorns and thistles. It receives God’s present curse and anticipates his future destruction ([12:29](#)).

It is probably true to say that these warnings here and elsewhere in Hebrews have caused more unnecessary anxiety to believers than almost any other verses in the New Testament. Aware of moral failure or spiritual apathy, thoughtful people with world over have been haunted by these passages, some driven to despair at the thought that, having neglected or forsaken Christ, they have forfeited for ever the blessings of the gospel. This teaching has not only troubled distressed backsliders; it has baffled professedly dispassionate theologians. Those who are committed to a Reformed or Calvinistic doctrine of grace rightly emphasize God’s sovereignty in our salvation and have been careful to point out that once a person is saved, he is always saved. Those who favour an Arminian interpretation of salvation do not deny that the truly saved person will ultimately be saved, but emphasize endurance. They rightly stress the importance of human responsibility, pointing out that we are not celestially manipulated robots making our way along predetermined routes totally outside our control. Theologians from both schools of thought adduce appropriate Scriptures. The Calvinist naturally rejoices that we are kept by the power of God, whilst the Arminian reminds us that we are also to keep ourselves in the love of God.<sup>20</sup>

These difficulties of interpretation, however, are not simply the preoccupation of theologians; many pastors have been genuinely bewildered by this teaching in Hebrews. They are only too deeply aware of people in their own congregations who appeared to begin the Christian life with fine promise and immense spiritual potential. But these

<sup>20</sup> [1 Pet. 1:5](#); [Jude 21](#).



professed believers, with such a rich spiritual life-expectancy, have since turned their backs on Christ, are now plainly embarrassed by their ‘conversion’ experience and openly disavow their baptismal profession or the promises made at confirmation. The minister or evangelist is bound to ask himself whether such people were really ‘born again’ spiritually. Thoughtful church members find themselves similarly troubled by such passages. They genuinely want to help people who have drifted away from their earlier spiritual moorings and have either allowed themselves to be carried away by strongly secularist currents into alien waters, or have deliberately rejected all their previous Christian commitment. Most Christians know of people who were once warm-hearted believing colleagues, but are now adrift without anchor or aim. Were such people ever ‘saved’, one naturally asks? If they are now plainly indifferent or even forcefully opposed to Christian things, what is their eternal destiny?

There have been innumerable attempts to provide an adequate explanation of these verses. It is not our purpose to rehearse them, though that is not meant to be either dismissive of other views or ungrateful for some exceptionally helpful suggestions which have come from them. It is possibly best to summarize a few conclusions.

It is important, first of all, to say that these verses present us with *a genuine problem*. Some expositors have tried to overcome the difficulty by suggesting that the prospect of genuine believers slipping into apostasy is purely hypothetical. In other words, the author is putting up a purely imaginary situation: ‘If such believers ever opposed Christ it would be impossible to renew them to repentance, but then such a thing could not possibly happen.’ I am naturally diffident about rejecting a view sincerely held by many scholars, but find myself in agreement with Philip Hughes when he says that the danger of apostasy here ‘is real, not imaginary; otherwise this epistle with its high-sounding admonitions must be dismissed as trifling, worthless and ridiculous. Certainly, in our author’s judgement, the situation is one of extreme gravity. He is addressing readers whose loss of confidence and whose flagging will to persevere in the Christian race (10:35f.; 12:3, 12) point alarmingly to the possibility of their dropping out of the contest altogether, and in doing so of placing themselves beyond all hope of restoration.’

Secondly, these warning passages present us with *a particular case*. Naturally, there are lessons here for modern Christians and unbelievers alike, but these sayings must not be divorced from their first-century context in this Jewish-Christian community

with its special dangers and difficulties. Our first task in interpreting Scripture is to discover what it meant to its first readers and then move from that to present application. The main purpose of this letter was to urge these Jewish Christians not to allow themselves, under pressure of persecution, to abandon the distinctively Christian aspects of their faith and slip back into its purely Jewish elements. To do this would mean that they had taken their stand with the Jewish attitude to Jesus, that he was a blasphemer, not Messiah, worthy of execution of the worst possible kind. The form of apostasy envisaged here is surely on a par with the serious ‘blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’ warning in the ministry of Jesus, the sin of ascribing the good, God-inspired, healing ministry of Christ to the work of demonic forces. It is to describe what is Christ’s work as the devil’s work.<sup>21</sup> These believers were in danger of identifying themselves with Christ’s persecutors that first Good Friday, who deliberately rejected him and cried, ‘Crucify him.’

We are not here dealing with the sincere believer who is depressed about his spiritual failure, or the backslider who has temporarily lost interest in the things of God. We are here confronted with fierce opposition to Christ and his gospel, public rebellion against Christian things and a determination to bring Christ’s work to an end. The force of their Christ-rejection is vividly expressed in the tenses which are used here to describe their activity. Such people ‘keep on crucifying’ (present tense) for themselves the Son of God, and ‘keep on putting him to open shame’ (present tense again). If such people are resolutely determined to respond in this way to the message of Christ’s love and forgiveness, then certainly it is ‘impossible to keep on repeatedly leading them (present tense) afresh into repentance’.

Thirdly, there is a *serious warning* here. In other words, this passage and its parallels in this letter should not be hastily dismissed as though they merely dealt with a first-century situation without modern counterparts. As we have already indicated, similar warnings are found elsewhere in Scripture, especially in the teaching of Jesus. It is quite possible that these fierce opponents, although formerly having all the visible signs and marks of truly committed Christians, were not genuinely born again by God’s Spirit. They may have convinced others that they were believers and at one time even persuaded themselves that they belonged to Christ, but their so called ‘conversion’

<sup>21</sup> [Mt. 12:22–32](#).

proved to be spurious and counterfeit. Just as some of the seed in the famous parable told by Jesus<sup>22</sup> fell into some ground to produce merely temporary growth, so it was with these apostates. Initially the seed had all the signs of healthy life, but when subjected to tests of various kinds it did not continue its promising growth. The seed of God's word had not reached into the depths of their hearts and minds. Jesus said that such people receive the word *immediately* with joy but, because they have no root in themselves, when persecution arises on account of the word they are said to value, then *immediately* they fall away. Similarly, those who initially make better progress can easily be arrested in growth by the destructive weeds and thorns of anxiety and materialism. Worry and greed are enemies of the word; they betray a failure to trust in God's fatherly care. Moreover, these warnings are not simply found in the parables of Jesus. They are to be discerned in the New Testament's many vivid character studies. All sorts of people said 'Lord, Lord,'<sup>23</sup> and confessed their allegiance to Christ when first they met him, but they did not go on, and some actively turned against him—Judas, Demas, Simon Magus. Without indulging in morbid introspection, it is appropriate for all believers to examine themselves to see whether they are 'in the faith' (2 Cor. 13:5 NIV) and whether they are 'living the life of faith' (NEB).

We need also to remind ourselves that our spiritual security does not depend on a clear recollection of the moment of our conversion. Many people cannot point to a date and such a thing does not matter anyway. Some are brought to Christ suddenly and dramatically, but for others it is a slow, gradual process when the response to Christ may take place over a period of time, like the gradual opening of a flower. Jesus said, 'You will know them by their fruits.'<sup>24</sup> That surely is the clue. We depend for our salvation not on our love for God but his love for us, not on our commitment to him but his pledge to us, not on our hold on him but his grasp of us.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, we need constantly to remember that, forceful and relevant as these words are, because they are but a fragment of Scripture's total message, they can present us with only *a partial truth*. If we are to be built up in our faith, then it is of the greatest

<sup>22</sup> Mt. 13:3–9, 18–23.

<sup>23</sup> Mt. 7:21.

<sup>24</sup> Mt. 7:16.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Jn. 4:10, 19; Jude 24.

importance to store our minds with the truths of God's word. That will mean that whenever we come across a bewildering passage in the Bible, we shall attend carefully to what it has to say and then make sure that we compare scripture with scripture. Many distorted notions are promulgated because a verse of Scripture is wrested from its original context and then pressed into service in order to support an unbalanced idea which other verses in the Bible would deny. Alongside warning passages of this character one must also set the clear unequivocal teaching of Scripture concerning the eternal security of a Christian believer. This very letter contains such assurances. The author goes on here to emphasize that, although he is issuing these warnings, he is 'sure of better things' (6:9) in their case. He is confident that they belong to Christ's house and are partakers of his blessings. They have received a kingdom which cannot be shaken and as they endure in the Christian life they will certainly be equipped with everything good.<sup>26</sup> The many promises of the New Testament provide Christians with abundant evidence of their eternal inheritance in Christ. Their steady continuance and increasing love for Christ will prove the reality and genuineness of the work which God has wrought within them. Some experience of doubt can disturb the life of any Christian, but in such circumstances we do well to remember the words of that seventeenth-century saint, Samuel Rutherford:

Sinners are anchor-fast and made stable in God. So that if God do not change (which is impossible), then my hope shall not fluctuate ... Oh God be thanked that our salvation is coasted, and landed, and shored upon Christ, who is Master of winds and storms!<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Heb. 3:6, 14; 12:28; 13:20; 21.

<sup>27</sup> Letter to John Stuart, Provost of Ayr (1637), in A. Bonar, *Letters of Samuel Rutherford* (Edinburgh, 1891), p. 372.