

Preachers' Gathering 2018

Preaching Hebrews

Booklet 1 - Introduction

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Preaching Hebrews, Booklet One – Introduction.

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Sermon: Hebrews 1:1 – 2:4

The perfect work of Christ (1:1-4)

The writer opens his letter with a 3-fold shocker of a statement – there is a God; that God has spoken; that God has spoken to humanity supremely and finally in and through His Son, Jesus Christ. A total stunner of a claim. The essence of counter-cultural, politically incorrect arrogance guaranteed to turn off many Western, postmodern audiences in 2018. The writer then expands his claim through the rest of the letter, namely that the Word of God **reveals**, **redeems** and **renews** human life, ready for eternity! The world screams back at the writer ‘How dare you make such an outrageous assertion? On whose authority do you make such a shocking claim? What are the qualifications of a Son who you claim was this world’s final mouthpiece of God?’

Our author responds with a dense and detailed argument in a single sentence lasting 4 verses, followed by 10 more verses, giving his readers and ourselves the ultimate Christology in a nutshell and showing why the Son was *qualified* to reveal, redeem and renew life. This is central to the whole letter and even on the basis of statistics alone, this issue of the Son’s qualifications demands our attention – the adjective ‘better’ is used 13 times in Hebrews to compare Christ and his new order with the old one!

- a) Christ has been appointed ‘heir of all things’ (1:2). Linked to Ps 2:7-8, this grants the nations and the ends of the earth to Christ ie. His ownership of the entire cosmos (2:5) has been inaugurated and will be consummated at the end of the age. Christ has the right to rule His cosmos with all power and authority!
- b) Christ is the appointed agent of the Father for the creation and final subjection of the whole universe (1:2). A task of mind-boggling proportions – I’m told that light travels at 300,000 kilometers per second, but to cross the universe that journey of light will take 92 billion years to complete.
- c) Christ was and is God incarnate in all His glory and He upholds, sustains and controls this vast universe by ‘the word of His power’ (1:3a) towards its designed end. As the cosmos was created by God’s Word through the Son, so it is sustained by that same powerful Word. As we look at Christ, we see God’s glory and His revealed person and presence.
- d) Christ was and still is the perfect sacrifice for sin (1:3b). ‘After he had provided purification for sins’. A short, sharp statement of enormous significance. We have words available for human communication but in a real sense, words don’t take us far in trying to grasp the enormity of this brief third of a verse, which is why our writer expands these 7 English words into a total theology! In this universe only Christ is qualified and entitled to be our great High Priest.

We speak of heroes and heroines ‘paying the ultimate price’. Here was the inexplicable and incomprehensible sacrifice, the ultimate oxymoron – the human impossibility of being a ‘crucified Messiah’. A permanent sacrifice which leads us, freely forgiven, into the very presence of the living and eternal Godhead.

e) Christ ‘sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven’ (1:3c). Christ died, was raised and was exalted to occupy His place at God’s right hand. He alone was qualified to take up this position. Rooted in Ps 110, Christ is now occupying His past, present and eternal position as the one and only perfect mediator between God and humanity in His role as **Prophet, Priest and King**.

Writer’s Conclusion - Christ is superior to all others.

How superior is Jesus? (1:5-14)

The past prophetic voices show just how superior. Lest there be any doubt whatsoever about the superiority of Christ over and above the angels (1:4), our writer now repeats, reiterates and reinforces his growing mountain of OT evidence for Christ’s supreme position of authority and governance above the status of the angels. In 1:1-4, the writer of ‘Hebrews’ has laid a strong theological foundation for the entire letter – it is God-centred with 68 references to *theos*; it focuses on God’s exalted Son; it highlights the Word of God and its communication. Theology is the foundation for practice but we need to be so careful here that biblical text and context must be the foundation for our theology! Ultimately, the Word and Spirit will change lives. Those lives need to be cleansed by the risen and exalted Christ.

So the writer builds on his intro in Chapter 1 to expand the vision of Christ that is being laid before the readers. 1:5-14, with its many OT prophetic references, further throws the spotlight onto five themes:

- a) in 1:5, the Son is superior because of His unique relationship to the Father. Because of this, Christ holds a rank, position and power that is over every other name or being in the universe. Resurrection, exaltation, enthronement.
- b) in 1:6-7, the angels, respected by Jews, do worship the Son and are servants for God, yet ultimately they are inferior to the divine Son who is pre-eminent in the Church and cosmos.
- c) in 1:8-12, the Son is the anointed, eternal King (1:8-9) *and* the builder and terminator of the cosmos (1:10-12). He holds the supreme and superior authority, eternality and divinity. Father, Son and Spirit are one God. A Trinity of mutually related Persons, but a unity of equal essence (Council of Constantinople). Christ rules, dealing with sin and upholding righteousness.
- d) in 1:13 comes the climactic claim that only this Son, this Christ, has the right to be seated in power and victory at God’s right hand. Every enemy of

the Godhead will be defeated and brought into complete subjection to the Lord Jesus Christ.

- e) in 1:14, He it is who will usher in a transformed earth and heaven, but meanwhile He will use angels to serve us, the inheritors of Christ's salvation.

Both author and readers of this letter were very conscious of the intense reality of spiritual warfare and in any disintegrating culture, nation or society, the overwhelming need is for a strong focus on authority and accountability. Our own culture in 2018 is denying this need, yet at the same time crying out for it! It is this divine and human Christ, our great High Priest, who will sustain us as we persevere in a world hostile to Christ and the living out of the Christian life. Our writer is now moving to the heart of his exhortation thus far – God has no mediator or message that is greater or higher than Christ and His gospel.

Five truths about the Son in 1:1-4, reinforced and strengthened by five truths in 1:5-14, yet all of this is sandwiched between 1:2 'he has spoken' and 2:1-4 'we must listen'. *Why such a protracted and detailed Christology?*!

The Proof of the Power of Jesus – our ability to persevere (2:1-4)

- a) Caution – (2:1) 'Therefore we must *pay more careful attention* to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away'. Here is a major reason for the writer's extended Christology over 14 verses! *Because* of Christ's supremacy, our author pleads with the community to keep them on the straight and narrow. To push them towards what will move them forward in their faith in, and following of, Christ. God's final Word is in His Son. The gospel of Christ consists of truths and teachings that are of such importance as to be a matter of life and death. The Greek word *dei* is used here, indicating absolute necessity. They must not shift away from the word of the Son (1:2). That Word is the message of the gospel. But why is listening such a necessity?
- b) Condemnation – 2:2-3a., *Because* there will be judgment for those who ignore this salvation! The Law was mediated through angels, yet breaking of that Law carried specific and serious penalties. If so, then ignoring the salvation brought in and with Christ would carry greater condemnation. The writer feared that the community would then fail to confess Christ publicly and the impact of the gospel would be severely diffused.
- c) Confirmation – 2:3b-4. The gospel had come in and with Christ, but our author and his readers had heard gospel testimony from reliable witnesses. On top of that, though, God himself had confirmed the gospel and supremacy of Christ supernaturally through signs, wonders, miracles and

Holy Spirit giftings. The great acts of God validated the truth of the Word of the gospel. Our writer reminds his readers of the power of this gospel and the majesty of Christ's Person and Work. He wants to reignite the Christian faith and life of this struggling and suffering community of believers as they face persecution.

Our writer – and therefore we as preachers – need to focus graciously but firmly on the call to authority and accountability. We must present a God who actually does have the right to rule over us and to expect our submissive accountability. Grace must be taught but so must obedience, works and lives of holiness in response to grace! 'Drifting away' refers here to Christians who drift away from the message itself, rather than necessarily from God Himself. 'Escape' is not clearly defined and we need to weigh the points at which our writer is ambiguous in his intended meaning.

It is surely the writer's aim to give his readers such a mighty vision of God that they will see Christ's sufficiency to keep them, guard them, provide for them and sustain them, even in the direst of persecution circumstances they will face. If we hold firmly to the message of salvation, we can know that we stand solidly in that continuous line of Jesus, Apostles and God. Yes, Hebrews is a theological letter, centred on the Person and Work of Christ, BUT it is also a strong letter of pastoral exhortation to live out a transformed life by and in Christ. We are to persevere to the very end in the faith and faithfulness of Christ Himself.

Summaries of Each Chapter

CHAPTER 1

God has spoken through His prophets but now supremely through Christ. This Christ is heir of all things and creator/sustainer of the universe. Christ made purification for our sins and is now glorified in heaven. Christ is superior to God's angels – see the evidence 1:5-7 rooted in Ps 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chron. 17:13; Deut. 32:43; Ps 104:4. The Son is set high above all God's beings – 1:8-13, rooted in Ps 45:6,7 and the unchanging God in 1:10-11, rooted in Ps 102:25-27. The Son sits at the right hand of the Father and reigns supreme over all the enemies of God – 1:13, rooted in Ps 110:1. The angels are ministering spirits sent to serve the inheritors of salvation (1:14).

CHAPTER 2

If the message spoken by angels was binding and violations received punishment, then we *must* listen to what we have heard and act according to it,

so that we don't drift away! The evidence is in the Word, in the words of Christ, in signs, wonders and miracles, and in the gifts of the Spirit, given according to God's Will (2:1-4). All things in the universe are subject to Christ, even though just now, it might not seem like it. He has been exalted because of His voluntary humbling of Himself in death (2:5-9). We are His children and brothers, whether male or female, having been made so through His suffering by death on the Cross (2:10-13). Christ had to become human in order to redeem us from the fear and power of death and Satan. He made atonement for our sin and because of His suffering and temptation, He is now able to help us who are tempted (2:14-18).

CHAPTER 3

Therefore, fix your thoughts on this Jesus, apostle and high priest! He, like Moses, was faithful to God, but Jesus is faithful as a son over God's house. We are that house if we cling to our courage and hope! (3:1-6). This is followed immediately by a strong warning from the Holy Spirit against unbelief, based on a section of Psalm 95:7-11 and presented in Heb 3:7-11. We have a share in Christ if we persevere to the very end and don't turn away from the living God. Encourage each other not to be deceived by the sin of unbelief and learn from the lesson of Israel of old who were beset with unbelief, disobedience and a failure to enter the promised land (3:12-19).

CHAPTER 4

Therefore, because the promise of entering His rest still stands, we must ensure we don't fall short of it. The promise of 'rest' has been there since God finished His work of creation but we need to respond to God with *faith*, so as not to fail and fall short of inheriting the promised blessings of the Lord (4:1-5). Some will enter His rest but some who had the gospel preached to them formerly will be disobedient and will fail yet again to hear the Lord's voice, preferring instead to harden their hearts (Ps 95:7-8). They failed to find rest under Joshua, but God still had a further day of rest – a Sabbath-rest. If we enter God's rest we also rest from our own work, just like God did from His work. We must make *every* effort to enter that rest, rather than fall by our disobedience (4:6-13). God sees *everything*, His Word is living and active and we will be finally accountable to Him (4:12-13). *Therefore*, because we have a *Great High Priest* – Jesus the Son of God – who has gone through the heavens, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For Jesus is sympathetic with our weaknesses, He having been tempted like us, but without falling into sin. *Therefore*, we must approach the throne of grace with confidence, so we can receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (4:14-16).

CHAPTER 5

High priests are chosen from men to represent them in issues related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. Because high priests are human and weak, they must offer sacrifices for their own sins as well as for the sins of the people. Because high priests are weak, they are gentle with weak and straying people (5:1-3).

High priests are not self-appointed; they must, like Aaron, be called by God Himself. Indeed, Christ was called by God into this priesthood in the order of Melchizedek. This is recorded by the writer of Hebrews in 5:4-10, but anchors this record in Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:4. Jesus offered prayers and shed tears to the Father who could save Him from death. God heard Him as Jesus submitted reverently. Though a son, he learned obedience from what He suffered and when He had been made perfect, He became the source of the eternal salvation of all who obey Him, designated by God to be high priest in that order of Melchizedek.

In 5:11-13, the writer pauses to reflect that his readers are still immature – feeding on milk rather than solid food - and therefore unable to teach, failing properly to understand righteousness and good from evil.

CHAPTER 6

Therefore, let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and move on to maturity, leaving behind certain basics about Christian faith and practice (6:1-3). The writer then lists a range of Christian experiences which a believer can have and yet still be in a position, if they fall away, of being impossible to be brought back to repentance. The reason is that they would be crucifying Christ all over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace! (6:4-6).

Well-watered land produces crops and receives the blessing of God, but thorny land is worthless and is in danger of being cursed and burned up! (6:7-8).

However, the writer is confident that in the readers' case, there will be things that accompany salvation. God is fair and will recall their works and love. Make your hope sure by persevering in deeds and love right to the very end. Don't be lazy, but rather imitate those who through faith and patience inherit that which has been promised (6:9-12).

Thus, for example, Abraham, after patient waiting, inherited God's blessing and many descendants (6:13-15).

Men swear oaths by someone greater than themselves. God was determined to make clear His unchangeable plan to bless His heirs with His promise, so He confirmed this with an oath. God cannot lie and wants to encourage us in this

hope of His. This hope is an anchor. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus entered on our behalf. He has indeed become a high priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek (6:16-20).

CHAPTER 7

In 7:1-10, the writer of Hebrews supplies more information about the previously-mentioned Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He had met Abraham on his return from the defeat of the kings and blessed him. Abraham then gave him a tenth of everything. His name means '*King of righteousness*', but also '*King of Salem*', meaning '*King of peace*'. No father or mother or genealogy or beginning of days or end of life. Like the Son of God, he remains a priest for ever. Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder. The law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people ie their brothers – even though their brothers are descended from Abraham. Melchizedek however did not trace his descent from Levi, but he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises! The lesser person is blessed by the greater – in one case, the tenth is collected by men who died; *but* in the other, by him who is declared to be living! It could be said that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

The argument continues and expands in 7:11-22. If perfection could have been achieved through the Levitical priesthood – for on the basis of it the law was given to the people – why was there still need for *another* priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? When there was a change of the priesthood, there had to be a change in the law. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For Christ descended from Judah and Moses had said nothing about priests with regard to that tribe. What we have said is even clearer if another priest like Melchizedek comes along, for Melchizedek has become a priest *not* on the grounds of an ancestry regulation, but rather on the basis of the power of an indestructible life – see Ps 110:4) The former regulation is set aside as weak and useless. A better hope has come, by which we draw near to God. He became a priest with a divine oath (Ps 110:4), namely, that God will not change his mind about the eternal nature of this new priesthood. *Because* of that oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

Finally, in 7:23-28, the writer argues that there have been many human priests, all of whom have had their service cut short by death, BUT that Jesus priesthood is permanent because He lives for ever. Indeed, Christ can save

completely because He always lives to intercede for them! This high priest meets our needs – He is holy, exalted *and* set apart from sinners. He does not need to offer daily sacrifice for His own sins and the sins of others! Christ offered sacrifice for their sins *once and for all* when he died on the cross. The law appointed high priests who were weak, but the oath, coming after the Law, appointed the Son who has been made perfect *forever*.

CHAPTER 8

We now indeed do have a high priest who sat down at the right hand of God and who serves in the sanctuary. This is the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, *not* by men (8:1-2).

Each high priest was appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices. If Christ had been on earth he would not have been a priest, for there are high priests on earth who serve at a sanctuary that is actually a prescribed, earthly copy (Mosaic) and shadow of the heavenly one. *But* the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant He mediates is superior to the old one. Jesus' ministry is founded on *better* promises (8:3-6).

If the Old Covenant had been sufficient, there would have been no need to set up a new one. God had found fault with the people over their disobedience to the old covenant when He had brought them out of Egypt and *He* then set up a new covenant, by which He would put his laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. He will be their God and they will be His people. No longer will men need to teach men to obey God; rather they will all know the Lord because He will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more (8:7-12) – founded on the promise of (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The Old Covenant will soon disappear, for it is obsolete and is replaced by the new covenant (8:13).

CHAPTER 9

In 9:1-5 the writer of Hebrews describes the setting up of the tabernacle of the first covenant, with its regulations for worship and earthly sanctuary. First room had the lampstand, table and consecrated bread, called 'the Holy Place'. Behind the second curtain was another room – the Most Holy Place – containing the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant, the latter containing the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover (mercy seat).

Then in 9:6-10, the priests entered the outer room and carried on their ministry regularly. *Only* the High priest entered the inner room but only once a year and

with *blood* – an offering for the sins that the High Priest himself and the people had committed in ignorance. In this the Holy Spirit was showing that access to the Most Holy Place had *not yet* been revealed, as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. This is an illustration for the present time, showing that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were *not able* to clear the conscience of the worshipper (v.9). These external regulations – food, drink and ceremonial washings – applied until the time of the new order.

The rest of Chapter 9 deals with the New Tabernacle / New Covenant of the Lord Jesus Christ. The argument runs as follows:

9:11-14 Christ came as High Priest of our salvation and went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that was not man-made ie not part of *this* creation. He did not enter by animal blood sacrifice. He went into the Most Holy Place by his own shed blood, having obtained eternal redemption (v. 12). Sprinkled animal blood gives outward cleanness. Christ by the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God and cleansed us from acts leading to death, so that we might serve the living God.

9:15 Because of this, Christ mediates a New Covenant so that ‘the called’ will inherit their promised eternity, through his death as a ransom that frees us from sins committed under the Old Covenant.

9:16-21 Only on the death of a person does his/her will become valid and effective. Even the Old Covenant became effective by Moses act of taking the blood of animals and sprinkling the scroll and the people with that blood. His was the blood of the Covenant that God commanded the people to keep. Moses likewise sprinkled the Tabernacle and all the items contained within it that had ceremonial use. Indeed, the law demands that almost everything be cleansed with blood and there is *no* forgiveness without the shedding of blood.

9:23-28 The copies of the heavenly things *had* to be purified with these sacrifices, *but* the heavenly things needed better sacrifices than these! For Christ did not enter a copy – a man-made sanctuary – but rather entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. Nor did Christ enter heaven repeatedly, like the annual entry of the High Priest into the Most Holy Place, with animal blood. Then Christ would have had to suffer repeatedly since creation, rather did Christ appear at the end of the age just *once* to ‘do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself’. Just like humans die once and then face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to remove the sins of many. He will appear a second time, not as sin-bearer, but to bring salvation to those awaiting Him.

CHAPTER 10

10:1-4) The law is only a shadow of the great things coming – *not* the realities themselves. Therefore, by the mere repetition of sacrifices year after year, the law can never make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it *had* been able to do this, then the sacrifices would have been stopped and the worshippers would have felt freed from the guilt of their sins! As it is, those animal blood sacrifices simply reminded people annually of their sins because those offerings simply could not take away sins!

10:5-18 *Therefore*, when Christ came.... The writer now quotes then explains Psalm 40:6-8. The law required specified sacrifices and yet the Lord was not pleased with them. Christ had then come to do the will of God. By that very will, we have been made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all (10:5-10). The writer then focuses again on the fruitless labours of the priests in repeating sacrifices, but Christ sacrificed himself only once, and sat down at God's right hand. He has made perfect those being sanctified – by His one sacrifice – and He awaits the final submission of His enemies (10:11-14). The Holy Spirit bears witness to God's law being written on hearts and minds and sins being forgotten (10:15-18) – rooted in Jeremiah 31:33, 34.

10:19-25 *Therefore* because we have entered the Most Holy Place through the blood of Christ, by the new way of the curtain – His body – and with a great priest over the house of God, let us *draw near* to God with fulness of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold to this hope, for the God who promised is faithful. Let us seek ways to push each other on towards love and good deeds. Let us carry on meeting together and encouraging each other as that great Day approaches.

10:26-39 If we *continue* to sin after receiving knowledge of the truth, then there is no remaining sacrifice for sin. There remains awful judgment for those who have insulted Christ, who have despised the blood of Christ and who have offended the Spirit of grace. We are aware of the dreadful consequences, based on Deut 32:35,36; Ps 135:14; (10:26-31). Look back to the early days when you suffered pain and loss for your faith because you knew the greatness of your eternal possession. Now hold on to your confidence and *persevere* so that you receive your promises. Christ will not be slow to come, so live on in faith and don't shrink back, so God will not be displeased with you (10:32-38). In 10:39, the writer affirms his confidence that the readers of this letter *will* hold to their faith and be saved.

CHAPTER 11

Verses 1-2 introduce the dominant subject of Chapter 11 – faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. The ancients were commended for this. All the following were '*by faith*':

v.3 The universe was created at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

v.4 Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain.

v.5-6 Enoch was taken by God without dying! He pleased God. We must approach God, believing that He exists. He rewards seekers.

v.7 Noah believed God and acted – heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

v.8-10 Abraham went, even though he didn't know where he was going to! He lived in a foreign land. He, plus Isaac and Jacob, inherited God's promise.

v.11-12 Old Abraham and barren Sarah conceived, as they held to the faithfulness of Him who had made the promise! They produced many descendants.

vv. 13-16 These people still had faith at the point of their deaths, aliens and strangers at their deaths. They were all looking for a heavenly city, country and home.

v.17-19 God tested Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, even though it was through Isaac's line that God had promised to produce Abraham's descendants.

Abraham trusted that God could even raise the dead! Abraham received Isaac back from the dead, figuratively speaking.

v.20 Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau r/e their future.

v.21 Jacob was dying and blessing each of Joseph's sons.

v.22 Joseph, nearing death, spoke of the exodus of Israel from Egypt.

v.23 Moses' parents hid him for 3 months after birth – they saw his special nature.

v.24-28 Moses as an adult refused to be known as son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose suffering with God's people, rather than enjoy fleeting sin. He preferred disgrace for Christ's sake rather than Egypt because he was looking for his reward. He left Egypt and kept the Passover, seeing the God who is invisible.

v.29 The people passed through the Red Sea, unlike the Egyptians!

v.30 The walls of Jericho fell.

v.31 Rahab, the prostitute, was spared because she welcomed the spies.

vv.32-38 The writer refers then to Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets gained great victories and escaped death. Some were raised back to life, whilst others were tortured and killed – to await a resurrection. Varied was the form of persecution and suffering, BUT...

vv.39-40 *All* were commended for their faith, yet *none* received what they had been promised. God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made *perfect*.

CHAPTER 12

12:1-3 Therefore, because we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us *throw off* all hindrances and sins *and run* with perseverance the race set out before us, *fixing our eyes on Jesus*, the author and perfecter of our faith - who bore the cross and sat down at God's right hand. *Consider him* who suffered so much, so that you will not grow weary and give up.

12:4-6 In struggling against sin, you have not yet shed blood. Remember the encouragement of being sons of God: His discipline of His sons proves His love of them. See the root of this in Proverbs 3:11-12.

12:7-13 This theme is taken further as the writer treats hardship and discipline – evidence of our sonship! Every human father disciplines his sons, and this persuades us to surrender to the Father's discipline, so that we might *share in his holiness*. It will seem hard and harsh at the time, but if we accept the training of it, it will yield a harvest of righteousness and peace. *Therefore*, says the writer in 12:12-13, strengthen your arms and knees and make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled but rather healed (Prov. 4:26).

12:14-17 Try to live in peace with everyone and be holy, so that you might see the Lord. Make sure no one misses God's grace and don't allow bitterness to sprout and spread. See that all avoid sexual immorality and the sort of godlessness displayed by Esau, who sold his birthright as oldest son, for a meal.

12:18-27 You have not come to a dark and burning mountain that cannot be touched and utters only condemning words to those who approach. RATHER, you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the city of the living God, to thousands of angels, to the church of Christ. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, to Jesus, mediator of a New Covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Make sure you do not refuse him who speaks (12:25). If they didn't escape when they refuse him who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven! *Then* His voice shook the earth, *but now* He is shaking the heavens (Haggai 2:6).

12:28-29 *Therefore*, because we are receiving a kingdom that *cannot be shaken*, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with *reverence* and *awe* because ‘our God is a consuming fire’ (Deut. 4:24)

CHAPTER 13 Concluding Exhortations

13:1-3 Continue to love each other as brothers; entertain strangers - they could be angels without you knowing it; remember those in jail as if you were fellow-inmates; remember the ill-treated as if you also were suffering.

13:4-6 Keep marriage pure and don’t worship wealth. The Lord will keep us content – see Deut. 31:6 and Psalm 118:6-7.

13:7-8 Remember your leaders who spoke God’s word to you. Imitate their life and faith. Jesus Christ does not change.

13:9 Avoid strange teachings. It is grace that strengthens us, not ceremonial foods.

13:10-16 We have an altar from which the officials at the tabernacle must not eat. The high priest takes the animal blood into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burnt outside the camp. Jesus suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy by His blood. Go to Him outside the camp for we are looking for a city that is to come. Continually offer to God through Jesus a sacrifice of praise. Do good to others and share with them. God is pleased with such sacrifices.

13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority so that their work will be a joy.

13:18-19 Pray for us. We believe we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably. Pray I will be restored to you soon.

13:20-21 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant, raised Christ the Shepherd from the dead, equip you with everything good to do His will. May He work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ.

13:22 I urge you brothers to bear with my word of exhortation for I have written only a short letter.

13:23 Our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.

13:24-25 Greet all your leaders and all God’s people. Those from Italy send you their greetings. Grace be with you all.

Summary of Whole Book

(based on some thoughts of FF Bruce.)

- 1 In the past God has spoken in various ways through the prophets but He has now finally spoken in His Son who is greater than any prophet or angel. Moses' law, with its severe stipulations, was communicated through angels. How much more serious then if we ignore the salvation provided by the Christ Himself! The future and eternal dominion of the world has been committed to Christ. Psalm 8 teaches that God put everything under the dominion of humanity, but Christ had to take our human nature upon Himself in order to win back this dominion. To achieve this, He conquered Satan who had usurped that dominion and put humanity into bondage. Christ invaded the realm of death that Satan had ruled and controlled. Christ is truly human and as such is qualified to serve as High Priest on our behalf. Because of His own experience of pain, He knows all our trials and therefore knows when and how to help us in our own struggles.
- 2 Be careful: those who rebelled against God in the wilderness were kept out of His rest in the promised land. However, there is a better rest than Canaan awaiting God's people. Yet we must not forfeit that rest by rebellion against God when He speaks to us through His Son, a greater One than Moses.
- 3 Jesus is our great high priest, able to sympathize with, and help, His people. He who underwent Gethsemane can be called upon for understanding and grace to help us. God Himself called Christ to this office in an irrevocable oath – 'You are a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek'. I would like to expand this issue, but you are still spiritually immature. Be warned that anyone who has already been baptized and tasted the blessings of the new age can never repeat the experience of repentance and conversion if they commit apostasy. I have a better hope for you than to think you want to commit apostasy. I want you to move forward to full maturity. Don't stagnate or stand still!
- 5 So, Christ is divinely appointed as a high priest of Melchizedek's order. Melchizedek was priest of God Most High who suddenly appears in the ancient, sacred records, though with no word of his previous or subsequent career. He was great, and Abraham paid him tithes and received his blessing. We can say that Levi – ancestor of the priestly families of Israel – paid tithes to Melchizedek in the person of his great-grandfather Abraham. This indicates that Melchizedek is greater than Levi, and Melchizedek's priesthood better than Aaron's. If indeed perfect access to God had been attainable under Aaron's priesthood, then why should God have appointed

the Messiah as priest of a different order?! Jesus' priesthood after Melchizedek's order is superior to Aaron's – Jesus was confirmed in office by the oath of God. Jesus is immortal and sinless cf Aaron's line of priests have to present a repeated sin-offering for their own cleansing before presenting one for the people. Jesus' sacrifice of Himself deals with our sin for ever!

- 6 The Aaronic priests minister under the old covenant of Mount Sinai but now obsolete. Jesus mediates the new covenant, foretold by Jeremiah. The old covenant provided for taking away external impurity by animal sacrifices but that could never remove SIN; under the new covenant Jesus sacrificed Himself to God and by this He purifies the conscience from guilt and breaks the barrier between His people and God. Aaronic priests minister in an earthly sanctuary of the old order but a curtain blocks access to the divine presence; Jesus ministers His spiritual and eternal high priesthood in the heavenly sanctuary where there is no barrier – the earthly sanctuary is only a temporary and inadequate copy of the heavenly one! It's the difference between shadow and substance!
- 7 Therefore, let us leave behind the old order and use the new route by faith and hope, opened up by Jesus' own death. This will bring assurance of the very real, though invisible, eternal certainty of the Coming Christ. Many former people of future-looking faith experienced this hope and gained God's approval. Such promises were to be fulfilled later and we now need to follow their example. Indeed, we need to follow Christ's example of living by faith. Through the Cross, He now rules from God's right hand. Let us not be pulled down by our trials for such trials actually prove us to be true sons and daughters of God. We have the fullness of revelation in a way that the people of old had not been fully aware. We will inherit the promise of glory in its fulfillment in Christ in this new order. Then we will fully experience sharing in His glory after His Second Coming. Why on earth would we want to slide backwards into our old ways of living when we have all this to look forward to?
- 8 Keep going forward as Christians in patience and hope. Live as Christians should live. May the God who raised His Christ from death, enable you to do *His will* in the totality of your lives.

Historical/Cultural Contexts

It needs to be acknowledged that although these contexts are crucially important in the task of biblical exegesis, yet many of our answers about these issues, with regard to Hebrews, remain uncertain and inconclusive.

William L. Lane in 1998 wrote – ‘Hebrews is a delight for the person who enjoys puzzles’. Another William – Barclay – wrote in 1957 ‘When we come to read *The Letter to the Hebrews* we come to read what is, for the person of today, the most difficult book in the whole New Testament’. FF Bruce begins his commentary ‘Since, however, neither that community nor the writer is expressly identified in the text as it has been preserved to us, the document presents us at the outset with a number of critical problems to which no agreed solution has been found.’

Hebrews was aimed at immature Christians who were tempted to give up on the church and recapture their pre-Christian lifestyles. The writer was persuading discouraged believers, who were on the drift, to draw near to Christ and persevere in their walk with Him. He wants them to ‘hold fast’, to ‘strive to enter’, to ‘go on to maturity’, to ‘seize the hope’ set before them (3:6; 4:11,14; 6:1,18). They needed to learn endurance – Abraham ‘patiently endured’ because of the divine promise (6:15); Moses endured by turning away from Pharaoh and his Hebrew contemporaries and looking into the face of God (11:27); Jesus endured by the ‘joy set before him’ when facing intense opposition (12:2-3). God is ready to speak to us effectively through Christ and we need a vision of His uniqueness.

Who were ‘the Hebrews’?

The English title of the letter suggests that the readers were Jews. Yet immediately some argue that the real title should be ‘against the Hebrews’, though with no clear evidence. In any case the title seems to have been a much later addition to the text and may indicate a later writer’s view! What is sure is that the readers were indeed Christians – (Heb. 6:9-10; 10:39). It is true that the OT is quoted very extensively in Hebrews, with 35 quotations from and 34 allusions to the Septuagint (LXX), although it is also true that much of the gentile world was familiar with the LXX, with Jewish sacrifices and with Jewish culture. Also, in Hebrews are 19 summaries of OT material and 13 references to OT names or topics: so we need to be aware that the readership of Hebrews, *might* have included Gentiles. FF Bruce sees a real possibility that

even the author might have been Gentile. The author does not describe the Jews as 'Pharisees' or 'legalists'; nor does he describe the Gentiles as 'barbarians'. It may have been a mixed audience worshipping in a house church or house churches.

Some scholars do argue that the addressees could well be Gentile Christians in danger of 'falling away from the living God' (Heb 3:12). It is implied that if Jewish Christians relapsed into Judaism, this would not involve a renunciation of 'the living God'. A relapse into Judaism would at least mean that they would carry on worshipping the God of Israel. Moreover, the repeated use of the phrase 'dead works' (6:1; 9:14) suggests that those addressed had a Gentile background. However, it seems that the audience rightly took it for granted that the Levitical priesthood was instituted by divine authority but may have wrongly taken it for granted that such provision for them was God's final step. Converts from paganism would not be so assured of the divine institution of the Levitical priesthood. Also, the phrase about going to Christ 'outside the camp' (13:13) would make more sense if written to an audience of Jews. Overall, Bruce suggests that the readers were *probably* Jewish believers in Jesus but who had been influenced by the non-conformist Judaism of the Essenes or Qumran community. Thus, for example, the reference to 'instruction about ablutions' in 6:2 *might* be addressed to such readers.

Thus, the addressees seem to Bruce to have been Jewish Christians who had never seen or heard Jesus in person but learned of Him – as did the writer himself - from others who had listened to Jesus in person. Since their conversion, they had experienced persecution – public abuse, imprisonment, stealing of their property, but not yet actual death – for their faith. However, their spiritual progress in the faith had now become *arrested/slowed down/stalled* after a great start. They may well have been reluctant to leave Judaism behind, thereby losing the protection that Judaism enjoyed under Roman law. The writer warns them not to fall back but rather to *persevere* in the faith. The readers were therefore likely to have been Hellenists schooled in the Greek OT and their knowledge of the rituals of Israel would have been based on their reading of the OT, rather than by direct contact with the Jerusalem Temple.

Some scholars feel that the writer may have been addressing a sub-group within a larger Christian community. He criticizes them (e.g. Heb 5:11-14) and exhorts them to remember their leaders (e.g. Heb 13:7, 17, 24). This likely sub-group are also urged to continue meeting with other Christians (e.g. Heb 13:25). They *may* be former leaders and are now struggling to follow. It thus seems likely that they were a certain group within the Christian community rather

than the community as a whole. Bruce thinks these readers were possibly one house-church in a wider group of citywide house-churches, from which the one house-church was tending to separate itself from/neglect the others in the city.

When was the letter written?

We have a number of definite references to Hebrews in *1 Clement* which has been dated around AD 96. So, Hebrews must have been written *before* AD 96 but how much before?! AT Robinson has argued for all NT documents to be considered pre - AD 70 and this has been neither proved nor disproved! He places only 1 and 2 Thessalonians and James before AD 50. Few scholars would date any NT document *before* about AD 45-50. Clues do exist – the material on the sacrificial system appears in the present tense and presumably prior to the AD 70 destruction of the Temple. However, Greek tenses focused on aspect rather than time. Nevertheless, if the writer had known that the Temple had been destroyed, surely, he would not have used the present tense because he was trying to say that the old (sacrifices) has passed away and the new had come.

If the ‘Timothy’ of Hebrews 13:23 – released from prison - was the co-worker of Paul, then this would have been around the AD 50’s or perhaps early 60’s. However, we do not know how long Timothy outlived Paul or when Timothy actually died. Nevertheless, if the Temple *had* been destroyed already, then surely it would have suited the writer’s argument - about the old passing away – for him to mention this! Surely therefore Hebrews was written before AD 70. The author’s concern about their lack of spiritual maturity even after some years as believers (5:12-14) suggests the lapse of time before Hebrews was written. Persecution mentioned in 10:32-34 seems to have happened somewhat earlier. Options – if the group was in Rome it might have been the persecution under Claudius in AD 49, under Nero in AD 64, or under Domitian in AD 91-95.

But, if the letter was written to Palestine, then it could have been at the time of the early persecution after Pentecost (see Acts). The believers had not yet suffered to the point of death (12:4) and this would suggest a period *before* Nero. It was nevertheless a period of real persecution under which some were falling away – (11:35-12:3; 12:7; 13:3,12-13). Thus, Hebrews might be dated *before* the AD70 fall of Jerusalem, and sometime *around* the mid 60’s. ie *after* about 30 years of the Roman church’s existence. Bruce tentatively favours a date before, but not long before, the outbreak of persecution in Rome in AD 64. He points out that the author writes as if the ritual of the tabernacle – similar to that of the unnamed Temple – was still going on in the present ie just prior to

the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Others believe that the absence of any specific reference to the temple in Hebrews suggests that it was written after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Some therefore date the epistle in the second half of the first century, possibly in the early 80's AD.

Where were the readers?

We have a clue in the text – at Heb 13:24 'those from Italy' send a greeting to the readers.' There are two theories here –

- a) Those in Italy with the author are sending the greeting. Implication – the author is in Italy together with the others who are also from that place. This indicates that the readers are *outside* Italy.....OR
- b) Those who are with the author outside Italy, but who come from Italy, are sending greetings back to the readers. Commentators tend to favour b).

By the mid first century AD, Rome – a likely destination for this letter – had a population of around one million, including between 40,000-60,000 Jews.

A readership in Rome is a strong possibility because of Heb 10:32-34; 12:4. This would fit the persecutions in Rome between AD 49 and 64 ie between Claudius and Nero. Pastors in the Hebrews Letter are uniquely called *hegumenoī*, a word used elsewhere in *1 Clement* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* – both linked to the church at Rome. Indeed *1 Clement* shows extensive use of Hebrews.

Some argue for Alexandria as a destination, but if it had first been sent there, then why would folk like Clement of Alexandria have considered it to be Pauline. Bruce argues that because Alexandria gave early acceptance of Pauline authorship to the letter, then why would Alexandria so quickly forget Pauline authorship and attribute the letter to someone else?!

Others say the readers were Jewish Christians in Palestine, but why would the readers refer to generous givers (Heb 6:10; 10:34; 13:16) when we know the material poverty of the church in Jerusalem.

There are two notable suggestions concerning the readers' identity:

- 1 A H Trotter – A small group of former leaders in the church have found it hard to submit to the current leaders of the church. These leaders had been persecuted in Rome and functioned 'underground' during the blitz on the church by Claudius in AD 49. These leaders emerged around AD 64 but rejected the new leaders and are now being reprimanded for their lack of commitment to the new leaders, to the community and to Christ. The old

leaders may be mixed up with doctrinal error and may be reluctant to submit to authority. Therefore, they need to know a *fresh* vision of Christ

2 F F Bruce - the readers could have been in a church location somewhere resulting from the large exodus of Hellenistic believers that fled Jerusalem after the death of Stephen. Some still argue for Jerusalem as the letter's destination BUT the author fails to refer specifically to the Temple itself. Moreover, the author refers to the long-term ministry 'to the saints' (6:10) whereas the Jerusalem Church had been very much a recipient, not a giver, of ministry.

Bruce takes his point about the nature of nonconformist Judaism among the readers of the Letter to the Hebrews and suggests that this could well fit in with Rome as a likely destination for the letter.

Authorship

Origen – 'As to who wrote the epistle only God knows for sure'!

Any Jewish person – and indeed many Gentiles – might have been able to grasp and write about the Levitical priesthood in 'Hebrews'. In that sense the specific identity of the author is less important than we might be tempted to think. We *do* know a certain amount about the author – he is rooted in Hellenistic Judaism. The letter calls us to *think* and *live* out of knowledge of, and obedience to, God.

Clues to the type of author

Heb 2:3-4 is key. The author says the salvation about which he writes 'was first announced by the Lord, [and] was confirmed to us by those who heard him'. This indicates secondary knowledge of the gospel message rather than reception by direct revelation. So it seems unlikely to have been one of the 12 apostles.

Heb 11:32 uses a masculine participle, showing the author to be male.

The author refers in 13:23 to 'our brother Timothy'. The author had personal knowledge of this Timothy. This has been used by some as evidence pointing towards authorship by Paul.

The author was living with people 'from Italy' (13:24). He had written a brief 'word of exhortation' (13:22), indicating he was a preacher of the gospel. He asks the readers to pray he'll soon be restored to them – perhaps he is in prison.

The author was well-educated – fine grammar, vocabulary, style, rhetoric and philosophical knowledge.

An expert in his use of the OT, combining allegory with literal application. He thinks creatively and critically in theology – he presents a thesis, analyzes it to develop it, departs from it to fit his structure, returns to it and fits his digressions into his ongoing arguments in a polished and stunning fashion.

The author uses religious symbols extensively – priesthood, sacrifices, tabernacle, feasts ie. the breadth and depth of the cultic life of Israel.

He was a preacher with a pastor's heart, tough and tender! He warns brutally but encourages those who are serious about their faith (Heb 6:1,4-6,9; 10:26-39). It is widely agreed that Hebrews starts off more like a *sermon* than a *letter*. Its contents had the feel of a typical sermon of the Greek-speaking synagogues of the era. See Heb 13:22 cf Acts 13:14-15. If so, Hebrews is in effect an *extended sermon*. The writer uses

verbal analogy – using one passage to explain another in light of a term or phrase the two have in common;

argument from lesser to greater – what applies in a lesser situation most certainly applies in a more important situation;

the Old Testament to show his readers how to remain faithful to Christ; and *a formal style of rhetoric* obtained in advanced education.

Few people will understand this now. He combines such a sophisticated training with Christian tradition, lovingly to urge his readers to persevere in Christian commitment, through this 'word of exhortation' (13:22) inspired and revealed by the Holy Spirit through the human writer.

He knows this community well and expects to be heard as a man who carries authority. He is well aware of the issues facing this church (13:4 – honouring marriage) yet he doesn't name names.

He is very conscious that this church has problems with obeying leaders – see 5:11-6:3; 10:25-39; 12:15,25; 13:7. Other texts also show his pastoral and personal concerns for people in the church – (3:1,12; 10:19; 6:9,11; 13:19,23). Such texts indicate that the author of this letter was not an abstract or 'arm-chair' theologian but rather a hands-on, practical minister to the people of God.

Theories of authorship

- 1 APOLLOS – First suggested by Martin Luther and widely supported since then. (Acts 18:24) shows that Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, a learned man and strong in Scripture. This would fit him well to the clues we see in the text of Hebrews itself. He had an accurate view of Christ and taught well (Acts 18:25, 27-28). He knew how to refute Jewish interpretations of the Law. Paul referred to Apollos along similar lines to Timothy – (1 Cor 16:10-12; Heb 13:23; Acts 18:28). *However*, Apollos is never mentioned as author prior to Luther's era! Strange that the Alexandrian Church did not record some knowledge of authorship by Apollos (an argument from silence, though). Also, there is no mention about Apollos having a formal education or being exposed to the teachings of Philo in Alexandria. Apollos has no written works to his name and yet the author of Hebrews was so good in language that he would surely have written considerably! Nevertheless, Apollos does stake a high claim to possible authorship of this letter!
- 2 BARNABAS – Tertullian suggested this around AD 200, *but* this information seems to have been secondary in source and Tertullian's language is not always clear. He may be mixing up Hebrews with the very different Epistle of Barnabas. There are some links between Barnabas and the author of Hebrews: Acts 4:36 presents Barnabas as a Levite from Cyprus and thus a Jew of the Diaspora, likely to be familiar with the Septuagint. Heb 13:22 describes itself as 'a word of encouragement', linking it to the name of Barnabas. He gave property and money for the gospel (Acts 4:37 cf Heb 10:34). Barnabas' connection with Paul favours Barnabas as author of Hebrews. The letter reflects Pauline ideas and the author seems to expect his authority to be recognized. Barnabas travelled widely with Paul and would have been exposed to Paul's preaching. Thus, Barnabas was likely to have been an interpreter of Paul for the Hebrews. Paul and Luke count Barnabas as an apostle and this might explain the sort of authority exercised by the letter's author.

However, there are some arguments *against* Barnabas as author of Hebrews. It is perhaps a little strange that if Barnabas was author, then why did the early church not give recognition to this fact. Perhaps because the theologically defective Epistle of Barnabas was wrongly attributed to him, then maybe there was a reluctance to attribute the genuine Hebrews to his authorship. Another factor against Barnabas (Heb 2:3-4) has the author seeing himself as a lesser authority than the primary witnesses to Jesus. This however is not a strong case because Barnabas has no known connection to

Jesus prior to his relationship with Paul in Acts. Also, Barnabas could have been an authoritative apostle *and* a secondary witness! However, Barnabas has no known link with Rome, so how could he have been that close to the community in Rome to write Hebrews? This is another argument from silence!

3 PAUL – Over the course of history, although not in the 20th Century, the case for Paul has been the most commonly argued one amongst scholars and commentators. How did the early church fathers link Paul to the Letter to the Hebrews? The *Western* Fathers wrote mainly in Latin and were loyal to the Bishop of Rome, whilst the *Eastern* Fathers wrote in Greek (or Syriac, Coptic or other Eastern languages) and tended to resist the dominance of Rome. Hebrews was known early on in the West – Clement of Rome quoted it often but without reference to its authorship. Marcion, with his anti-OT bias, omits Hebrews in AD 150 from his canon, whilst the Muratorian Canon omits it too in about AD 185. Tertullian mentions Hebrews but only slightly. In the 4th Century, Augustine and Jerome began to discuss Hebrews but failed to defend its authenticity. In the East, Eusebius of Caesarea quotes Clement of Alexandria who quotes Pantaenus, bishop before him about AD 190 who defended Pauline authorship.

The claim here was that because Paul was Apostle to the Gentiles, he wanted to remain anonymous in writing to the Hebrews, especially also because Jesus was the apostle to the Hebrews. Clement views Luke as the translator of a Hebrew original written by Paul. Thus, the style is like Acts, which is why Clement feels that Paul omits his title ‘Paul, an apostle’ from Hebrews. Clement also claims that Paul omitted his name so as not to offend the Jewish readership who would react against Paul having rejected his Jewish heritage and chosen to serve the Gentiles. Origen the Alexandrian scholar (about AD 185-254) feels that Hebrews does not have the style/eloquence/direct approach of Paul himself. Origen suggests that Hebrews was written by a disciple of Paul, based on what his master said. Thus, churches may treat Hebrews as Paul’s own. Eusebius also accepts Hebrews as Pauline.

In Gal 1:11-12 Paul lays claim to direct revelation of the gospel from God Himself. In light of this text, plus 2 Cor 12:1-7, it is hard to see why the author of Hebrews would admit to ‘secondary’ revelation if it was Paul. Could the two authors be one and the same person?! Also, Paul never fails to ‘sign’ his other letters. This suggests that Paul was not the author, though it MIGHT be the case that, according to Clement of Alexandria, Paul omitted his name out of respect for Christ, the true apostle to the Hebrews. Clement

of Alexandria felt that Hebrews was written by Paul for Hebrews in the Hebrew language, but that Luke translated it and published it for the Greeks. He then argued that Hebrews and the Lukan writings had similarities, but the Greek of Hebrews showed no sign of having been translated from Hebrew. At this stage of scholarship, we simply cannot know for sure.

The vocabulary of Hebrews and Paul's epistles are radically different from each other. For example, Paul uses forensic language to describe Justification in salvation, but when the author of Hebrews uses such language – like *dikaiosune* – he uses it to mean ethical righteousness ie. obedience to God's will. Or could this be explained by Paul's concern for the total picture of Salvation ie its outworking in practice as well as its initial justification? In total, 169 terms that are used in Hebrews appear nowhere else in the NT.

Paul and Hebrews differ in sentence-building and distinctive imagery. Hebrews' long sentences are smooth and sophisticated classical pieces, whereas Paul's long sentences are sometimes rough, rambling and diffuse.

Theological differences also exist. Hebrews is different from Paul but not disagreeing with Paul. There are differences of emphasis. Hebrews says 'resurrection' is an 'elementary' teaching (Heb 6:2), stressing the exaltation of Christ to the right hand of the Father as his triumph over death (Heb 9:24-27), while Paul elevates the resurrection to that status (Rom 1:4). Paul stresses the forensic and redemptive aspects of Christ's blood whereas Hebrews stresses the cultic cleansing, sanctifying and perfecting work of the sacrifice. Are these not complementary though? Paul makes little reference to the new covenant – 2 Cor 3:6 - (is this true?) and fails to speak of Christ in relation to the high priesthood, yet these issues are central in Hebrews.

Trotter feels that the overall evidence is finely balanced between Barnabas and Apollos as the more likely author of the Letter to the Hebrews. The final choice, says Trotter, is impossible to make. G.H. Guthrie leans towards Apollos as author, as did Martin Luther. Bruce concludes that Paul and the author of Hebrews held in common the apostolic teaching but when we assess detail, it becomes clear that the two authors had very different thought, language and technique of OT quotation. A number of scholars have pointed out that the title 'apostle Paul' does not appear on a single ancient manuscript of the Letter to the Hebrews. Calvin concludes 'I can adduce no reason to show that Paul was its author'. Others have suggested authorship by the hand of Luke or Clement of Rome or even Silvanus (1 Peter 5:12) because of the similarities between Hebrews and 1 Peter.

Background

Dr Bruce W. Winter's recent research at Tyndale House, Cambridge, on suffering under the Romans, generally, greatly helps our understanding of the pressures on Christians in NT times. Hebrews recounts the strong desire of many Christians to escape the double-edged sword – exile and execution – but at the same time, such escape would plunge them into real spiritual danger!

Christians reading the Hebrews Letter had suffered much because of their faith (10:32) and understandably were very tempted to find a way(s) of avoiding more agony. In their early days of persecution, the Christians had stood firm.

The perpetual divinity of Jesus was proclaimed in Heb 1:2-3. But this was the same status granted to departed Roman emperors in the period AD 14-68 (Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero). Thereafter, all new Caesars were given the title *pontifex maximus* of the Roman Empire ie. 'high priest'! Jesus was a *threat*! These emperors carried out ritual and sacrifice that guaranteed the divinely-superintended safety and security of the entire Roman Empire across the world. Rome – and other cities - also had its own great high priest as vital Imperial Cult mediator between gods and Empire.

In Hebrews 4:1-8:1, Christ is portrayed as great high priest, appointed by God for ever and this must have been a massive challenge and threat to the Roman Imperial authorities. Heb 10:21,23 claims that Christians no longer needed to make sacrifices but did need to be loyal and obedient to Christ! A direct threat to Roman peace and stability. So, no surprise that many Christian believers had endured suffering and public humiliation (10:32-34), by Roman law. Another punishment lay ahead, second only to death in severity, namely exile to an isolated place, a fate greatly feared right across the Roman Empire.

The writer to the Hebrews pleads with his readers 'Therefore now let us go forth to him outside the camp bearing his reproach' (13:13). The readers are strongly tempted to flee to Judaism as a way to avoid persecution, but at the same time to commit apostasy from the Christian faith. (See § C iii p28 below) To explore this thesis, the evidence needs to be examined:

a) Their sufferings

Heb 10:32 indicates much *conflict* of sufferings, a highly combative term of contests and/or warfare situations. Intense struggles through which the believers had not actually given up! – Likely scenarios:

- i) Verbal public abuse in the theatre – they had been publicly exposed in the public arena. Passive voice is used to show how they had been forced, alongside criminals about to go to prison, to bear public humiliation and mockery. Read Acts 19:21-41 for a comparable situation in the Ephesian theatre. In another case, according to *I. Eph. 572 ll. 1-12*, a total of 43 people, who tried to violate the sanctity of the Artemis Cult in Ephesus, were sentenced to death.
- ii) Public floggings – Heb. 10:33 hints at them. Philo of Alexandria tells how Flaccus, Prefect of Egypt from AD 32-38, humiliated Alexandrian Jews by having them flogged naked in the theatre. Some died; some had life changing injuries. We know that early Christian converts were similarly treated.
- iii) Imprisonment of Christians – after humiliation there might follow prison as ‘fellow prisoners’ (10:33), involving loss of freedom and lack of food, unless gifts/bribes to Roman officials were offered by family or friends.
- iv) Loss of possessions – this was done by Roman officials seizing Christians’ property whilst they were in prison. Yet the believers accepted this ‘with joy’, knowing that a far greater inheritance awaited them (Heb 10:34-35). All these struggles would have tempted some Christians, facing current and future pain, to slide back into the far safer Judaism, thus committing apostasy from the Christian faith.

b) Many legal punishments

- i) Severe penalties, especially exile – Roman Magistrates during Nero’s rule obtained certain biases to punish Christians with hard labour, deportation to an island and ultimately exile. Jails were intended for holding men briefly, prior to trial and sentencing, but they were increasingly used to detain Christians, foreigners, slaves and women for longer periods of time.
- ii) Christian infringement of Roman Law – in 45 BC restrictions were placed on the meetings of assemblies and gatherings. In the period of AD 14-68, this was reinforced in level of intensity, as emperors were very uneasy about hotbeds of political dissent and disloyalty to the Emperor and Empire ie treason and sedition. Jews were free to meet weekly, but not Christians. Disobedience to this ruling was punished by heavy fines, especially for Christians who tried to worship together

(10:23-25, 26-30). Weekly worship for Christians was in fact banned for Christians – see Pliny the Younger, ‘To the Emperor Trajan’, 10.96.

iii) Loyalty to Roman imperial gods – All subjects in the Empire except Jews were required to offer sacrifices to the emperor in their temples. The governor Pliny the Younger (AD 61-c.112) questioned Christians about this. Some gave up their faith. In the early second century, believers who held to their faith were executed or, if Roman citizens, sent to Rome for trial. Christians generally were threatened with the death penalty for failure to bow to the Caesars. It was very tempting to shift into Judaism to avoid death or exile.

c) The possibility of exile

Hebrews uses metaphorical phrases for exile, namely ‘outside the camp’ and ‘outside the gate’ (13:11-14). Jesus ‘suffered outside the gate’ (13:12).

Key aspects:

- i) Exile as a *penalty* – insulting, lonely, an alternative to the death penalty for some, harsh, loss, desolate location, distant place, brutal climate, infertile land for crop growth, polluted water supply, potentially permanent exile, loss of citizenship, loss of all property (see Ovid 43BC-AD17 in Ibis and Ex Ponto: Ovid had offended Augustus in one of his poems and for another undisclosed reason besides, and the result was that Augustus exiled him in about AD 1 to Tomis, an isolated city on the Black Sea coast where Ovid stayed till he died in AD 12). The writer to the Hebrews was calling the believers to share in Christ’s suffering and bear His abuse (13:13).
- ii) Continuing *Endurance* – the believers in any case have no enduring city here on earth (13:12-14). The Empire was claiming that Rome was the eternal city of peace and security! For Christians, *Heaven* was the eternal City of God! (10:34-35). The way ahead will be very tough for the Christians, but the ultimate reward lies at the end. To give up would be very dangerous and will incur the loss of divine blessing (10:38; Heb 2:3-4) ie destruction = apostasy, but the writer is confident of their persevering faith (10:39).

Hebrews 11 gives many examples of enduring faith! Christians must be as determined as naked athletes who wish no hindrances to their race (12:1). Looking to Jesus was vital. Jesus looked beyond His own humiliating death to His final reward (12:2). These Christians had not yet been called upon to pay the ultimate price of death.

iii) *Strengthened* to face exile (*phugas*) – their pain was a sign of divine sonship and approval for their endurance and acceptance of discipline (12:7-11). News of Timothy's release from jail would be helpful (12:12-13; 13:22-23). Exile lay ahead and that must have been utterly daunting! They had to cling utterly to Christ to face this.

Their great high priest had undergone such painful loneliness and would sustain them (2:18; 4:16; 13:12-13). They would need to know Christ's presence in a big way! The role of the Jewish high priest appointed by Rome had been superseded by the One eternal Son of God with perpetual divinity. Christ had also superseded all the divine Caesars in their high priestly office. These believers must go 'to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured' (13:13). He it was who suffered, endured and can give them grace for their own form of alienation and utter estrangement. Exile would be painful but temporary. Exile would yield righteousness in the sanctifying process of these believers through the experience of exile (12:7-11).

Two reasons for endurance, therefore, are that

- (i) Christ Himself suffered outside the gate to win the Christians' sanctification and
- (ii) these believers had no enduring city here on earth, as they persevered in suffering, whilst awaiting the final fulfillment of the new order of the Christ.

Structure And Argument

(based on G Guthrie's textual work)

The Letter to the Hebrew was structured as a *sermon* and this has baffled commentators for centuries (view of George H. Guthrie, in his Commentary p.27). Commentators have therefore been very divided as to just how to outline and divide up this book! Many writers have structured their work around the theme of Christ's *superiority* over the *Prophets* (1:1-3) over the *angels* (1:4-2:18) and over *Moses* (3:1-4:13) etc. The problem is that these passages also contain other material that make them hard to divide up in a simple way! All this needs to be re-thought because Hebrews consists of two main foci –

Exposition – Focuses on the Person and Work of Christ.

Exhortation – Motivation of the readers to respond appropriately.

The Author *switches back and forth* between these two foci. He does not develop his arguments chronologically, systematically or neatly. He uses a method of point-by-point *exposition* of the text, but then followed by repetition of his *exhortation* about the response/action demanded of the readers rooted in each bit of exposition. (See outline below for details.)

Explaining The *Exposition*

The writer begins with an Introduction to his sermon at 1:1-4 and then moves into his *Christ Material*, section-by-section in two main parts –

1. The Position of the Son in Relation to the *Angels* (1:5-2:18). This section divides into:
 - a) The Son Superior to the Angels (1:5-14) and then a brief transition at 2:5-9, followed by
 - b) The Son lower than the Angels (ie. among humans) to Suffer for the 'Sons' (ie. heirs) – (2:10-18).
2. The Position of the Son, Our High Priest, in Relation to the *Earthly Sacrificial System* (4:14-10.25). This section divides into:
 - a) The Appointment of the Son as a Superior High Priest (5:1-10; 7:1-28) and then a brief transition at 8:1-2, followed by
 - b) The Superior Offering of the High Priest (8:3-10:18).

Notice the development of a *Descent/Ascent* Theme here: Christ starts at the highest point universe, exalted high above all angels (1:5-14). He comes down into humanity's realm and lower than the angels to bear our sins (2:10-18).

Having lived out His solidarity with humanity, He is then separated from us and becomes High Priest (5:1-10; 7:1-28). Having fulfilled that sacrificial, sin-bearing ministry as High Priest, He is raised back into heaven (8:3-10:18).

The author makes *repeated* and *frequent* reference throughout the letter to the High-Priestly work of Christ. He comes back again and again to this theme.

Explaining The *Exhortation*

Here we find the author repeating again and again a number of key motifs – Falling Away, Sin, Punishment, Promise, Gospel, Voice Of God, Jesus/The Son, Faith, Obedience, Endurance, Entering, Examples. The author moves again and again from *Christ to congregation*, weaving together a devastating sequence of warnings, encouragements, positive and negative examples.

Endurance by faith will yield the promised inheritance. Falling away and rejecting God's Word will yield serious judgment. He motivates his audience towards *action* and *transformation*.

The Main Message

The preacher of Hebrews uses a specific technique here –

He challenges these lukewarm and struggling believers to persevere in their commitment to Christ. The Exhortation consists of warnings, challenges, examples and evidence of God's faithfulness to His promises, all of which are *rooted in god's word*. *However*, he lays a strong foundation in his exposition on Christ. The triangular dynamic involves Christ – Spirit – Word. As Trotter puts it – 'The ultimate bases for endurance, therefore, are their new covenant relationship with God's superior Son and an ongoing openness to God's Word. In other words, one's endurance ultimately will depend on the health of one's relationship to Christ and faithful obedience to the Word.' (p. 30) The author was addressing a struggling community that needed to strengthen its commitment to Christ by drawing near to the Lord. Our writer does, however, at a number of points in his letter e.g. Heb 6:9; 10:32,39, express his confidence in the faith and determination of the readers.

Our Interpretation Of Hebrews

A number of factors need to be borne in mind –

1. The author urges the readers to carry on confessing the name of Christ, despite the social and physical cost of such discipleship. This would be comparable to Christians losing their jobs because of a Christian confession or Christians suffering for their faith in China or North Korea for example.

It also speaks to those guilty of the sin of unbelief or spiritual laziness (3:13; 6:12). It challenges faith in a variety of situations (11:1-40) and encourages steadfastness in those tempted to ditch their faith and decide to return to a pre-Christian lifestyle or a Jewish compromise.

2. The genre of Hebrews is a *Sermon*, probably intended to be read as one continuous message which can be done in about one hour! This sermon has a *flow*, but it also employs the art of *repetition*. Each part has a specific role in the whole. A sermon is not merely the sum of its parts. The book deals with our *motivation for persevering in discipleship*.
3. We need to focus on language, style, word meanings, terms and phrases.

Dividing the text

1 after George H. Guthrie

Key: Times New Roman font = Exposition; Comic Sans font = Exhortation; Comic Sans italic = overlap between exposition and exhortation.
(Based on G Guthrie, pp 39-40)

Introduction: God has spoken to us in a Son (1:1-4)

1. The position of the Son in relation to the *Angels* (1:5 - 2:18)

A. The Son Superior to the Angels (1:5-14)

Warning: Do not reject the word spoken through God's Son! (2:1-4)

ab. The Superior Son for a time made positionally lower than the angels (2:5-9)

B. The Son lower than the Angels (ie. among humans) to suffer for the 'sons' (ie. heirs) (2:10-18).

Jesus, the supreme example of a Faithful Son (3:1-6)

The Negative Example of those who fell through faithlessness (3:7-19)

Transition (4:1-2)

The Promise of 'Rest' for those who are Faithful (4:3-11)

Warning: Consider the power of God's Word (4:12-13)

2. The position of the Son, our High Priest, in relation to the *earthly sacrificial system* (4:14-10:25)

Overlap: we have a sinless High Priest who has gone into heaven (4:14-16)

A. The Appointment of the Son as a **Superior High Priest** (5:1-10; 7:1- 28)

Introduction: The Son taken from among humans and appointed according to the Order of Melchizedek (5:1-10)

The present problem with the hearers (5:11-6:3)

Warning: The Danger of falling away from the Christian Faith (6:4-8)

Mitigation: The Author's confidence in, and desire for, the Hearers (6:9-12)

God's Promise, our basis of hope (6:13-20)

The Superiority of Melchizedek (7:1-10)

The Superiority of our eternal Melchizedek and High Priest (7:11-28)

ab. We have such a High Priest who is a Minister in Heaven (8:1-2)

B. **The Superior Offering** of the Appointed High Priest (8:3 - 10:18)

Introduction: The More Excellent Ministry of the Heavenly High Priest (8:3-6)

The Superiority of the New Covenant (8:7-13)

The Superior New Covenant Offering (9:1-10:18)

Intro: Pattern of Old Covenant Worship: Place, With Blood, Effect (9:1-10)

- a. Christ's Superior Blood (9:13-22)
- b. A Sacrifice in Heaven (9:23-24)
- c. An Eternal Sacrifice (10:1-18)

Overlap: We have a Sinless High Priest who takes us into Heaven (10:19-25)

Warning: The Danger of rejecting God's Truth and God's Son (10:26-31)

The Positive Example of the hearers' past, and an Admonition to Endure to receive the Promise (10:32-39)

The Positive Example of the Old Testament Faithful (11:1-40)

Reject sin & fix your eyes on Jesus, supreme example of endurance (12:1-2)

Endure discipline as Sons (12:3-17)

The Blessings of the New Covenant (12:18-24)

Warning: Do Not Reject God's Word! (12:25-29)

Practical Exhortations (13:1-19)

Benediction (13:20-21)

Conclusion (13:22-25)

2 after Raymond Brown

Brown suggests that Hebrews consists of two great themes, namely Revelation and Redemption, or to put it another way – the word of God and the work of Christ have been woven together throughout the letter. The Word Of God is central in Chapters 1-6 and 11-13, whilst The Work Of Christ takes centre stage in Chapters 7-10.

Brown offers this threefold breakdown of the letter –

- 1 What God has said to us** – The writer of this letter has a very high place for God’s Word – which requires a verdict from us (2:1-4) - and he refers to its various OT channels and contexts (1:1). This Word found form in the Person of Christ (1:2-3a), revealed in His ‘divine nature, perfect life, vital teaching, unique sacrifice and victorious achievement’ (Brown, p.18). This Son of God is greater than the OT prophets (1:1), the angels (1:36-2:18), Moses (3:1-6) and Joshua (4:1-10). This Word is a very serious business, for there are consequences for *Unbelief* (3:12,19) and *Disobedience* (3:18), and yet at the same time God pleads out of His huge compassion that we *must* listen to His Voice. The warnings are very clear – ‘do not harden your hearts’, ‘take care, brethren’, ‘exhort one another..... that none of you may be hardened’ (3:7-8, 12-13). This Word must be received by faith and accepted with obedience (4:2,6,11). It is a *Persuasive and Powerful Word* (4:12), exposing our inner life. ‘It condemns us and convicts us until we acknowledge the seriousness of our sin (4:13) and the immensity of His grace (4:16)’.
- 2 What Christ has done for us** – The writer uses *Contrast* to expound the work of Christ – (i) The priesthood of the old covenant was temporary, *but* Christ’s is permanent (7:24). (ii) The OT priests tended towards weakness and sinfulness, *but* Christ was sinless (5:2; 7:26). (iii) The former priests offered the blood of goats and bulls, *but* Christ offered Himself (9:13; 7:27). (iv) Their offerings gave only a partial cleansing – merely ‘the purification of the flesh’ - *but* Christ’s sacrifice purified the person’s ‘disturbed and guilty conscience’ (9:9,13-14; 10:22) (Brown p.19). (v) The OT sacrifices reminded worshippers of the seriousness of sin (10:3) *but* by Christ’s offering of Himself, our sins can be removed (9:26; 10:11-12). (vi) The OT system of sacrifice needed continual repetition, *but* Christ’s sacrifice was ‘once for all’ (10:11-12).

3 The argument developed – Humans are ignorant and need the divine Word in Scripture to reveal their need of forgiveness through Christ’s sacrifice (9:22; 10:18-22). Cleansing and freedom prepare a person for a life of dedication to the Lord. Thus, sanctification is a key theme in the letter (2:11; 10:10,14,29; 13:12). We are set apart for service to God in this world, no longer following sinful desires *but* living a new life because we now belong to Christ.

In order to obtain this ‘great salvation’ (2:1) for us, Christ entered this world as the perfect revelation of God’s mind and message (1:2-3). He was determined to do His Father’s will (10:5-7). He is God (1:8) but the letter also extensively portrays His humanity. H R Mackintosh once wrote (*The Doctrine of the Person of Christ*, Edinburgh, 1937, p.79) ‘Nowhere in the New Testament is the humanity of Christ set forth so movingly’.

He came from the tribe of Judah ‘made like his brethren’ (7:14; 2:17). He knew temptation but was victorious (2:18; 4:15; 7:26). He learned obedience through suffering (2:10; 5:8). He knew agony in the garden of Gethsemane as his time of sacrifice drew near (5:7; 9:14). Arrested, mocked and crucified. Tried and humiliated by sinful men (12:3). He suffered outside the city gate (13:12) and endured the cross, scorning its shame (12:2), knowing it was God’s will for Him and the only way to bear away our sins and make us holy (10:10,11,14). The ‘God of peace’ (13:20) raised Christ from the dead. He lives for ever (7:24), now exalted at the Father’s right hand (7:26; 8:1; 10:12), where He appears for us in the presence of God (9:24). In that holy place (6:19; 9:12), He intercedes for us (7:25) and will come a second time to bring ultimate salvation ‘to those who are waiting for him’ (9:28).

This Word of Christ is final and complete (1:2). Christ’s final work is expounded supremely in Hebrews as God’s purposes are fulfilled in and through Christ’s words and deeds. He saves completely and effectively. His work in dying and rising *effects the salvation of all who believe* (4:3; 10:39), *obey* (5:9) and *continue in faith* (3:6,14).

An alternative approach is to divide the text thematically:

3 Thematically

A preacher recently prepared a series of sermons on the book of *Leviticus* using a thematic approach that could profitably be adapted for a book such as *Hebrews*. That series of sermons consisted of 7 messages as follows –

- 1 Understanding The Old Covenant
- 2 Understanding Sacrifice
- 3 Understanding Priesthood
- 4 Understanding Food Laws
- 5 Understanding Atonement
- 6 Understanding Holiness
- 7 Understanding Sabbath

Finally, the text may be divided by a word that occurs 21 times, linking indicative with imperative. (This matches the sermon series in Booklet 2) :

4 at ‘Therefore’

1:1-2:4 Introduction. The Son and His superiority to angels (1:5-14).

Therefore (2:1) Do not reject this Word from the Son (2:1-4).

2:5-3:6 The Son, superior to angels, but lower for a time (2:5-9a); The Son, lower than angels..... (2:9b-18);

Therefore (3:1)fix your thoughts on Jesus, the faithful *Son* of God (3:1-6).

3:7-19 **Therefore (3:7; 3:10; 3:11)** A negative challenge. Do not fall away by unbelief and unfaithfulness. (3:7-19).

4:1-13 **Therefore (4:1)** ...A positive challenge. ‘Hearing’ must be combined with faith (4:1-2); the promise of rest for the faithful (4:3-11); we are judged by God and His Word (4:12-13).

4:14-5:10 **Therefore (4:14)** let us hold firmly to the faith we profess, since our sinless High Priest has gone into the heavens (4:14-16). The Son was taken from among humans and through much suffering was appointed by God according to the order of Melchizedek (5:1-10).

5:11-6:20 The hearers’ current problem of spiritual sluggishness and immaturity. **Therefore (6:1)** ...let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity (5:11-6:3); the danger of falling away (6:4-8); the writers’ confidence in, and hope for, these believers, coupled with his assurance of the certainty of the divine promise (6:9-20).

7:1-28 The superiority of Melchizedek (7:1-10), yet even this priesthood would be surpassed. The superiority of Jesus opened the way for drawing near to God by a better covenant. **Therefore (7:11)** ...if perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood, why was there still the need for another priest to come to our rescue in our approach to the living God? Many High Priests have come and gone in their mortality but Jesus lives for ever and has a permanent priesthood. **Therefore (7:25)** Christ is able to save us completely and eternally because He always lives to intercede for us.

8:1-13 The High Priest of a New Covenant (8:1-2). Every High Priest offers sacrifices and Christ is no exception. **Therefore (8:4)** if Christ were on earth, He would not be a priest, for there are others on earth who offer the law-pre-scribed gifts, but Christ exercises a superior ministry to all others, founded on a superior covenant and on better promises (8:3-7). Under the New Covenant, Christ will pardon and put God's laws in our own minds and hearts (8:8-13).

9:1-10:18 **Therefore (9:1)** ...the first covenant had worship regulations and an earthly sanctuary (9:1-5). The functions and limitations of this first covenant are then outlined (9:6-10). Christ brought in a new way by His own blood (9:11-14). By contrast, Moses had sprinkled animal blood under the Old Covenant (9:15-22). **Therefore (9:23)** ... these copies of the heavenly things needed to be purified with such sacrifices, but Christ gave His own body as the perfect sacrifice (9:23-28). The Old Covenant could not transform a person's life internally (10:1-4), **Therefore (10:5)** ...a new, different and eternal sacrifice was needed to bring in the New Covenant order (10:5-18).

10:19-39 In light of this new way of the New Covenant for a new life. Our High Priest will take us into heaven. **Therefore (10:19)** ... *Let us* draw near to God, with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith; *let us* hold to the hope we profess; *let us* consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds; *let us* not give up meeting together; but encourage one another (10:19-25). Don't reject God's Way, His Truth or His Son (10:26-31). Remember your earlier days as Christians when you suffered but stood firm in the midst of it all.

Therefore (10:35) ...Don't throw away your confidence; persevere in God's Will and you'll be rewarded (10:32-39).

11:1-40 Defining 'faith', followed by examples of changed Christian lives. OT people who lived by faith, even though they could not see the outcomes. They had not received the fullness of what had been promised.

12:1-11 Because of the ultimate perfection that we will experience in Christ alone, **therefore (12:1)** ... Reject sin and every other hindrance and let us run

with perseverance the race marked out for us., fixing our eyes on Him (12:1-2). Accept God's discipline that will yield righteousness and peace (12:3-11).

12:12-29 We will grow in Christ through His discipline and share in His holiness. **Therefore (12:12)** ...strengthen feeble arms and weak knees. Live in peace; don't allow anyone to miss God's grace; avoid roots of bitterness, avoid sexual immorality (12:14-17). You have not come to a dark place but to the Mount Zion of joy and glory (12:18-24). Listen to Jesus and obey Him who warns the Church from heaven (12:25-27). Don't turn away from this unshakeable kingdom where we have come to the angels, to God and to Jesus who care for us. **Therefore (12:28)** ...Since we are receiving an unshakeable kingdom, be thankful and worship with awe and reverence (12:28-29).

13:1-25 Love each other as brothers. Entertain strangers. Care for prisoners. Respect marriage. Don't love money. Remember leaders (13:1-10). Doctrine and life are inseparable (13:11-12). **Therefore (13:13)** ...Go to Christ to seek the city to come (13:13-14). Christ is our goal – **therefore (13:15)** ...worship through Jesus; be generous; obey leaders (13:17-19); live for God (13:20-25).

Dealing With Challenges In Hebrews –

(based on G Guthrie)

Example 1 4:1-13 Entering the rest of God

This concept has caused some confusion. Our writer to the 'Hebrews' ends chapter 3 with the promise of sharing in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first (3:14). He then warns against hardening of hearts, disobedience and unbelief, as evidenced by the wilderness generation who failed to enter Canaan (3:16-19). He moves rapidly and repeatedly between exposition on the Person and Work of Christ and the exhortation for action by disciples! In 4:1-2 our author transitions from the past failure of Israel of old (3:7-19) into the continuing promise of rest for the new people of God (4:3-11). He now deals with a 'spiritual rest' in which we cease from our own work (4:10) but we deliberately choose to enter that rest whilst avoiding a fall by disobedience v.11.

The writer combines exegesis of Psalm 95 and Genesis 2:2 and concludes in 4:12-13 with a very strong warning about the power of God's great WORD. The vital connecting text is 4:1-2 with its highly significant warning that

hearing God's Word is not enough; it has to be combined with *faith*. The word is not just 'be careful' but literally 'Let us fear' sliding away from God's will with its dire consequences. The focus is on 'today' and needs to be read, 'Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest *still stands*, be *fearful* of falling away!' He is *not* saying that particular persons *have* fallen away but that such a possibility exists, and caution is therefore needed. 'Be found' in v. 1 actually means 'seems' with an impersonal subject. But the perfect infinitive 'to have fallen short' suggests that this spiritual state describes a person who had never truly entered the rest of God. For the OT people of Israel, the 'gospel' was the promise of entry into Canaan, which they had forfeited by merely 'hearing' but not responding in faith and for the readers of 'Hebrews', it was the word of salvation proclaimed first through the Lord (2:3-4) but in danger of not being received with a faith that would persevere right to the end.

4:3-5 Those who 'have believed' are entering into God's rest which is described as ceasing from one's own works (4:10), yet it remains unstated whether this is a *present* spiritual state *or* a *future* existence in heaven? The theme of perseverance to the journey's end suggests entry to heaven, the Most Holy Place. However, others argue that the 7th day of creation has no evening end, so it could mean that God's 'rest' is not a location or point in time but rather a present reality, the 'Today' of present opportunity. If the 'rest' is totally future, how could some people have fallen short now? *All* of the community would still be short of entering the 'rest', if it was completely future. It remains unclear re the acceptance of the promise of 'rest' today, whether the 'rest' is actually entered a) Now through faith, OR b) At death at the point of 'rest' (12:23), OR c) At the final consummation (13:14), OR all three times! It may well be all three at the various stages of the journey of life – 11:16; 12:28; 10:22. Ps 95:11 and Gen 2:2 use the common word 'rest'. The author of 'Hebrews' links the two to stress that the 'rest' of God is not something of the past (4:6-9) and that it involves the cessation of work (4:3,10). Psalm 95:11 shows that the 'rest' of God in Gen 2 was an ongoing reality when the Psalmist wrote. This theme is then developed in 4:6-11.

4:6-11 Our writer states in verse 6 that 'It still remains that some will enter that rest'. The Greek text includes the phrase 'since therefore', indicating that the argument is moving to a consequence, namely that the question of rest was not closed off by the disobedience of the wilderness generation. Our writer believes that the Psalmist in Psalm 95 has clearly left open the door of access to God's 'rest' 'today'. In 4:11 the term 'Sabbath-rest' is introduced, rather than just 'rest'. This is most probably rooted in Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:26-28, 32

in which the people of God were not to do any work because this was the Day of Atonement for the high-priestly offering. Thus, the Sabbath that remains for God's people is a new covenant Day of Atonement Sabbath in which they are cleansed from their sins. There is thus a very real link to the gospel of Christ. Our writer then follows this in verse 11 with a strong exhortation for his readers *actively and seriously, to seek entry* to this rest and avoid anything that would cause them to disobey and fall away from faith. Thus, there seems to be a paradox between stopping our own work and making every possible effort!. How is this paradox resolved?

1. The desert generation failed to enter Canaan (land of rest/promise) because they failed to act in obedience to God's command to enter. They followed their own wisdom and so failed to enter.
2. The readers of 'Hebrews' must obey God's call to enter the promised Sabbath rest of atonement ie they must combine hearing of the gospel with faith – trusting obedience in 4:1-2. If they fail to do this, it will result in spiritual catastrophe! They must obey the 'voice' of God that they have heard (3:7). That is vital because the *voice of God* speaks *promise* and *encouragement*– see 4:12-13 which now follows –

4:12-13 Our author once again uses Ps 95 to speak about the 'voice of God' here in 'Hebrews'. The Word is a sharp and penetrating force of discernment into human lives. It is living, and it *actively does* the work of God. After all, it was that Word which brought the cosmos into being, which sustains it now and which has the cutting edge to reach every part of our inner being, with its words of promise *and* judgment. We cannot hide anything from the Lord's eyes. We are totally exposed and vulnerable to His gaze. We dare not be casual or trivializing where the Word of God is concerned. The consequences are catastrophic indeed.

Resting from our own work, as God did, means an obedient but active *dependence on God*. Effort to enter God's rest is still demanded of us, whilst we are at the same time called to recognize our total dependence on His grace.

INTERPRETING Example 1:

As we already know, the big picture of Hebrews is a vital starting point, but we also need to remember the author's interpretive processes, structures and methods. As we gather together exegetical detail from the passage, we need to consider the theme of 'rest' in light of the overall context. We need to move

from textual details to the overall thrust of the message and then move in reverse back to the details. Likewise, we move backwards and forwards from the worlds of the text to the modern contexts, drawing out the possible implications of the ancient texts and contexts for today's contemporary readers.

The author of the 'Hebrews' interprets the OT using two rabbinic approaches to interpretation –

a) **Verbal analogy**

This is based on the presupposition that there is a consistency and continuity in God's revelation of truth, ie a number of passages having 'verbal analogy' (words in common) can be studied in light of one another because God has used specific terminology to get across specific truths to His people. Thus, regarding Hebrews 4, the author uses Genesis 2 (which refers to 'rest') to help our understanding of 'rest' in Psalm 95, in which God calls it 'my rest'. Thus, we are to cease from our works as God did from His (Heb 4:10).

Entering of the rest by God's people thus involves obedience (4:11) and faith (4:1-3), two issues closely linked in the author's mind (cf 3:18-19) and involving the ceasing of one's own efforts and the acceptance of God's will.

b) **Stress on plain meaning of specific words –**

Rabbinic interpretation of the OT held a very high respect for the text and 'literal' interpretation was generally very acceptable. Thus Heb 4:6-9 for its author meant that the 'Today' of Psalm 95 was a time of opportunity for promise or punishment well beyond the Davidic era and continues to be valid.

It is of course vital to understand what the author of Hebrews is trying to communicate about 'rest' if we are to achieve accuracy in our interpretation and application of this material on God's promised rest. Care is needed here because the actual nature of 'rest' is left somewhat unclear by our author. Because of this, it will be harder to reach a specific application of 'rest' and yet 4:1-13 is embedded in a challenging and exhorting wider section of text and does demand a response from its readers! Heb 4 is not only about physical and emotional rest. It is much wider and deeper than that. Its main focus lies in our spiritual need to draw near to God! The text should not be used to argue for a Sabbath rest one day a week or for abstinence from work on a Sunday.

APPLYING Example 1:

1. We must *fear* missing this rest. We must respect the power and judgment of God (3:7-19). Some preach such a strong focus of God as Judge that His grace is obscured or forgotten. Others focus so much on promise and blessing that they obscure our spiritual accountability. Our application needs to be balanced between grace/mercy and anger/judgment. A balance of promise and warning needs to be found. In Heb 4 the divine word of promise *must be balanced* with the issue of accountability. The gospel calls us to the grace and love of God in view of the holiness and justice of God.
2. We must not *reject* the ‘rest’ by our failure to mix faith with obedience to the Word of God. Those in Heb 4:1-3 *seem* not to have truly believed. Some seemed to be falling away from the Christian movement and have not truly stopped their own works or taken up serious faith in Christ’s sufficient sacrifice.
3. We must *cease from our own works*. In 4:10 this means turning from trusting in our own ways of being justified and casting ourselves wholly on God’s way of repentance and faith. It is a rest *but needs active obedience to God*. We must be active in response to God’s actions. Paul stresses that salvation is by faith alone and James stresses that works do not earn salvation, but they do express genuine faith. Thus, Abraham offered Isaac as an expression of faith and was justified (James 2:21-23). Hebrews believes in the idea that a lack of obedience shows a lack of true faith (Heb 3:12,18-19; 4:2,11). Hebrews also reflects Paul’s view of faith as trust in God, expressed in ceasing from one’s own works (4:10). For the Hebrews writer, faith relates to the unseen (Heb 11:1) and therefore trust is needed. Faith for Hebrews certainly does not guarantee health and wealth.
4. We can enter the rest *now*, but consummation awaits the end of the age. Salvation has an inauguration, continuation and consummation. For some in the community, their seeming *faithlessness* suggests their hearing of the gospel has not truly been joined to faith. True believers live out faith now in God’s rest, *but* the ‘rest’ will be consummation as they persevere right to the end.
- 5 All who lack God’s promised rest are actually spiritually stranded in the wilderness, somewhere between slavery in Egypt and the promised land of Canaan! Jesus says, ‘Come to *Me*’ (Matt 11:28-30), not to church, to rules, to a psychologist or to a holiday. It means finding and fulfilling our place as human beings in the created order. If we are still outside this rest, then we are in a dysfunctional relationship with God. We need to humble ourselves and come to the One who has made His Day of Atonement sacrifice as our

great High priest. We need rightly to relate to God by faith and obedience to His Word.

- 6 There are many people who connect with the Church by association and through activities, but who have not yet entered the ‘rest’, a real faith relationship with God in Christ. Faith is personal; it involves active trust in the promises of God; it unites us to Christ in a covenant relationship
- 7 We need to communicate the need to have real reverence for God and a commitment to God’s Word. All of us need to be aware of the great danger of trivializing God and the things of God. Real faith starts with our own encounter with God and our willingness to examine our own hearts.
- 8 Several ways can be used in order to expose ourselves more and more to the power of God’s Word. The Church needs regular Expository Preaching, plus reading, thinking through, reflecting on Scripture. Are we really listening to the Word and opening ourselves up to it in a life-changing way? Private reading/small group Bible Study? Overviews of Scripture? Personal study is a vital supplement to communal study. Memorization and meditation are great.
- 9 Spiritual growth demand time and discipline. Our lives need to give evidence of continuous transformation by God’s Word. This will impact those who are seeking to enter the ‘rest of God’.

Example 2 5:11-6:12 Warning against ‘falling away’

The author of ‘Hebrews’ has been discussing Christ’s designation as ‘High Priest’. As he moves into Chapter 5, he shifts his argument into His concern about his readers’ *spiritual immaturity*! There’s a definite sequence:

- A. 5:11-6:3 **Confrontation** – ‘You are spiritually immature’.
- B. 6:4-8 **Harsh Warning** – ‘You are in Danger’.
- C. 6:9-12 **Softening** – ‘I have confidence in you’.

A Confrontation i) **5:11-14.** 5:11 refers to 5:10, indicating that the readers had developed poor spiritual hearing skills! They had neglected the very ABC of God’s teaching. It seems they *had* previously had such teaching but needed it all again! This ‘teaching about righteousness’ *may* refer to what was taught in the second century re Christian suffering under persecution. They have failed to be ready for the huge cost and responsibilities of being disciples of Christ. The mature, by contrast, are those who know how to make right choices when faced with hard decisions (5:14). They need to be able to take on board the rest of his letter and ultimately to persevere in the face of growing persecution!

ii) **6:1-3** The author surprisingly decides not to repeat the elementary teachings, but rather to move them on to maturity. The author includes himself in the exhortations eg ‘Let us leave...’. The verb ‘go on’ is passive and suggests that the community will be moved on in maturity by *God Himself*. The writer does not want to abandon the elementary principles but to move to weightier issues of Christian discipleship. The matters listed in 6:1b-2 all have parallels in Judaism. They *may* have been trying to stick to areas held in common between Judaism and Christianity to avoid offending Jews. The six fall into 3 groups –

- a) ‘repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God’
- b) ‘instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands’
- c) ‘the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment’

If ‘instruction’ is viewed in apposition to ‘foundation’, it could be read that the foundation of repentance and faith *equals* instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection and eternal judgment. This would see the ‘repentance from dead works’ and ‘faith towards God’ summarize the initial step of Christian life. The baptisms may have been Christian or may refer to repeated washings found in first century Judaism. Laying on of hands may be linked with Holy Spirit anointing. The resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment would be theological truths about the end of the age. The writer had confidence in the readers moving forward towards maturity.

Application of 5:11 – 6:3 Some texts can be approached by propositions like Point 1, Point 2, Point 3 but sometimes we need to consider the situation of the author or hearers or a third party. We need to consider examples or situations. What truths are built into the author’s example or his readers’ situation and circumstances? Thus, we need to consider that the writer in 5:11-6:3 is looking for *Rhetorical Impact*. In 5:1-10, the writer introduces us to the Son’s appointment as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek:

(5:1-4 outlines the appointment of the high priest under the old covenant; 5:5-6 proclaim that Christ has been appointed a priest by God, quoting Ps 110:4; 5:7-10 shows the ‘path of appointment’ for Christ, by which He qualified as high priest – the path of obedience to suffering death).

Then the writer breaks off from the high priestly subject, but that may not reflect the preacher’s lack of ability to preach right through a topic or the lack of audience ability to understand the subject matter. Rather it shows the *skill of the preacher!* The strong language of 5:11-6:20 would have *stunned* his audience to listen more carefully to the really vital section on Melchizedek that

he will resume at 7:1. Thus, in 5:11-6:12 the writer focuses on the poor spiritual state of his readers in order to get their attention ready for the key argument about Christ's High Priestly work on their behalf.

The writer at times seems to be coming across in his letter as abrasive, sharp and unfeeling. Actually, he is a minister, very concerned for his flock, concerned *and* loving. He offers encouragement *and* specific helps for their spiritual growth. The reference to 'elementary teachings' indicates that converts really were discipled systematically in the early church.

How well do we as churches today *teach* our people in ways that will move them from immaturity to maturity? Our ministries of teaching our people need to be built on our own willingness to be vulnerable and open to positive criticism of our own failings and weaknesses. *E.g.* are we willing to have members of our congregations point out *our* negative features, like lack of eye contact? Confrontation must be rooted in a position of love and encouragement from our members. We need to await the right moment, having prayed about it, to confront folk. If we rebuke someone, we must be ready to give practical advice as to how to respond.

B. Harsh Warning 6:4-8

Introductory Thought – 6:4-8 is a harsh warning and 6:9-12 softens the warning. The former is designed to shoot fear into the hearts of those adrift. The latter is aimed to express the writer's confidence that his audience do not actually fit the description of the former! The section then ends with two exhortations – 'show...diligence' and 'do not...become lazy' (6:11-12).

Structure of 6:4-8

'For'

'(It is) impossible'

'The ones' (object)

'Once'

- a) having been enlightened...and
- b) having tasted the heavenly gift... and
- c) having become partakers of the Holy Spirit... and
- d) having tasted the goodness of God's word...and....the powers of the coming age
- e) and (then) having fallen away

'To renew to repentance again'

'Because they are a) crucifying to themselves (the Son of God)
and b) exposing to ridicule (the Son of God).

Exegesis of 6:4-8

The word ‘impossible’ is placed by the writer *first* in the sentence for emphasis. Then we have a string of participles. ‘Enlightened’ here probably means their early /initial exposure to gospel truth. The word ‘tasted’ (*geuomai*) actually means ‘to experience something. ‘The heavenly gift’ seems to be the blessings of God (Rom 5:15,17; 2 Cor 9:15; Eph. 3:7; 4:7) that surround salvation, rather than the Holy Spirit Himself. ‘Partakers’ means ‘partner in business’ but it is broad in usage and means ‘to have a close association with’ or ‘participate in’. Those who have fallen away were ‘companions of’ or ‘sharers of’ the Holy Spirit. They had also ‘tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age’. The Word of God and power are closely linked (1:2-3; 2:3-4; 3:7-19; 4:12-13) cf those who had heard God’s voice and seen his acts (3:7-11) in the wilderness *and yet* fell away through lack of faith, even though they had experienced these revelations!

NIV treats ‘if they fall away’ (v 6) as *conditional*. However, it can be treated as the culminating experience in a *sequence* of experiences. The verb ‘fall away’ (*parapipto*) can mean ‘go astray’ but the seriousness of the following descriptions suggest a *serious sin of rejecting Christ*. The final bit of this long sentence means it is impossible for them ‘to be brought back to repentance’ (*anakainizo* = ‘renew’) ‘again’ (*palin*), suggesting that those who had fallen away had repented previously ie. those who have fallen away cannot be brought back again to a true repentance. This text has been *highly controversial*!

Context of 6:4-8 ‘Repentance’ in 6:1 is vital to the author of Hebrews and it is inextricably linked to Christ’s totally unique sacrifice for sins (10:18,26). Once one has rejected Christ, there is nowhere else to go for forgiveness before God. Why? V6: ‘To their loss they are *crucifying* the Son of God all over again and *subjecting* him to public disgrace’. Both are *present participles*, probably showing action in progress. Up till this point, he has used the aorist. These acts of ‘crucifying’ and ‘subjecting...to disgrace’ modify the infinitive ‘to be brought back’. These participles can be viewed as causal (‘because they...’) or temporal (‘while they...’). The result is the same: *repentance has been, and is, ruled out because the fallen ones are rejecting Christ*.

Since the incompleteness of these participle actions is stressed, however, Heb 6:4-6 does *not* negate the chance of the fallen reversing course in the future. ie ‘as long as they are crucifying the Son of God and subjecting him to public disgrace’.

The fallen ones are identifying with those who treated the cross as an expression of rejection and who insulted Christ instead of bearing the shame of

identifying with him (Matt. 27:39-44). Our writer carries on with agricultural imagery that compares those who end well with God and those who don't. 6:7 = fruitfulness, leading to a harvest; 6:8 = failure leading to disappointment, devastation and the road to destruction.

C. Softening 6:9-12

In verse 9 the 'dear friends' indicates a strong change of tone. The writer is confident that his readers share in 'better things.... that accompany salvation'. Genuine disciples of Christ are on a road that will lead to the consummation of their salvation. *His reason for confidence?* Their faith has been lived out in 'work'. They have a love for God that is being worked out and expressed through ministry to his people. Works and ministry *are* important – Rom 2:6-7; 1 Cor 3:13-15; James 2:15-16; 1 John 3:16-20. Heb 6:11 shows how hard it is to know any person's standing before God, except for *continuing expressions of God's grace*. We must *persevere* in the love and work of God. Continuous and consistent *diligence* (*spoude*) is needed by the believers.

INTERPRETING Example 2

- 1 The language of Heb 6:4-12 is *ambiguous!* The text doesn't always define the author's intentions. The passage certainly describes those who have had association with the Christian community. Had they shown some signs of a new life OR had they given evidence of a real and true life-change? Those are the hotly-debated questions.
- 2 We *all* carry theological baggage into our work of interpretation! Personal and denominational experiences over the years tend to fix our positions. It makes objectivity difficult, but not impossible, to achieve.

Factors to bear in mind –

- a) This passage is *Exhortation*. He is trying primarily to motivate them into action not instruct them theologically. Obviously, the writer thinks theologically but his *main* hortatory goal may explain why he didn't define his terms in detail!
- b) Heb 6:7-8 is also a type of wisdom genre. Thus, we need to be careful of associating particular theological constructs with the images of 'rain', 'crops' etc. Thus, for example the reference to 'burning' cannot be assumed to refer to 'going to hell'. It is rather a general, but non-specific, reference to destruction.
- c) Beware of moving from a word meaning into a theological conclusion when the writer himself does not define that particular word! E.g. 6:4-5

may be saying that ‘tasted’ means to ‘experience something’ but there is no definition here. The word does *not* mean ‘to sample’ or ‘eat without fully digesting’. We are not told by the writer just what the ‘heavenly gift’ was or how its blessings were received and experienced by the tasters! What was it to be a ‘sharer in the Holy Spirit’? It could be a genuine indwelling OR an experience of the Spirit’s convicting presence but without conversion OR something else!

Various interpretations

1. The Hypothetical View – The writer wants to shake his readers out of their complacency, but the state described cannot actually happen. It is true that our author can use rhetorical skill well, *but* the problem is that there are *repeated*, real, severe warnings throughout the whole letter.
2. The Pre-Conversion Jew View – The readers are Jews who are linked to the Christian Community but without any actual commitment to Christ. However, there are specific refs to ‘holy brothers’, ‘Christ’s companions’ etc.
3. The Covenant Community View – Verlyn Verbrugge feels the Vineyard Song of Isa 5:1-7 is the background to Heb 6:4-6 and that God is rejecting a whole community rather than individuals. The vineyard is destroyed by God’s judgment against Israel and Judah, but according to Verbrugge does not affect every individual in the Hebrews context. However, the Hebrews author seems to make distinctions. In 4:1 he doesn’t want any to fall short; in 6:4-12 he distinguishes between those who have fallen away (6:4-6) and the hearers in whom he is confident.
4. The True Believer Under Judgment View – Those threatened by God’s judgment are true believers but cannot lose their salvation. This view is rooted in the wilderness wanderings judgment where the covenant people of God lost the earthly blessing of entry to the Land but did not lose their relationship with God. This view gives serious account of the association between the fallen and the Christian community. *However*, in 3:6,14 the author is concerned for his friends if they don’t hold on to their courage and hope. They appear to have fallen short of a level of commitment that combines faith with hearing the gospel (4:1-2). 10:26-31 describes the fallen as ‘enemies of God’ who are set for destruction. Those in 6:4-6 have no part in salvation. Overall the warnings are too harsh to make them mean loss of reward rather than loss of salvation.

5. The Phenomenological True Believer View – The readers are true believers who have lost their relationship with Christ and cannot expect salvation in Him when He returns. This is based on the phenomena of Christian experience in 6:4-8 eg Scot McKnight holds this view.

Pro's: He spreads his exegesis across a number of texts; he stresses 'inaugurated eschatology' ie salvation as a process involving conversion, development and future consummation at Christ's coming.

Con's: McKnight feels one can have present aspects of salvation and 'lose...faith' ie one can have a true relationship with Christ but then by lack of perseverance lose that relationship. Our perseverance is the evidence of the authenticity of our saving faith. Faith in Hebrews = obedience to the will of God. True relationship with God results in a lifestyle of obedience to God. McKnight assumes that all the readers of Hebrews are true Christians, but Guthrie reckons that the author of Hebrews is never actually sure that *all* the readers were true covenant people of Christ.

6. The Phenomenological Unbeliever View (Guthrie's own view) – The 'fallen' in Hebrews may have seemed to be genuine Christians as they related to the believing community, but by their rejection of Christ, they show that they don't have real faith. This means the readers *were* in danger of falling away. *Two concerns* –

- a) In this text, esp. 6:4-6, the writer *does* use language that can be interpreted as referring to Christians. They look outwardly like Christians in the community, but they lack true faith. They may have experienced all the elements of 6:4-6 but they *have not borne fruit* (6:7-8) and do not give evidence of the 'better things' linked with salvation (6:9-10). Guthrie argues that Hebrews eschatology is 'now and not yet'; likewise, its soteriology is present *and* future, but we cannot have one without the other ie if we reach the end *without* a relationship with Christ, because of lack of perseverance, then that relationship was never really there cf 1 John 2:19.
- b) Heb 10:29 the reference to 'being sanctified' has confused some. How can it be said that an apostate is 'being sanctified'? The answer is that the verb can be translated as an impersonal 'by which one is sanctified'. Ultimately the author of Hebrews *admits* his lack of knowledge of the true spiritual state of his readers. *It is known by God* but is related to *ongoing fruitfulness and perseverance*.

CONCLUSIONS on Example 2

1. Those who fall away from God, cutting links with the Christian community and rejecting Christ, are in serious trouble and stand under God's judgment. Guthrie p.231 'Those who fall away from the faith must not be allowed to slip calmly into the night'.
2. Participation in the Christian community does not necessarily equal salvation. Starting well does not guarantee ending well. We must care for those in our churches.
3. True spirituality is closely tied to fruitful faithfulness in the Christian life. True relationship with God shows itself in our works and in all of our ministries to others.
4. There are negative warnings in Scripture that have rhetorical power eg's. Matt 7:22; 1 Cor 10:6-12. What churches need to recover is a 'fear of the Lord'. Sometimes we need to hear case studies of those who have ignored the warnings and made shipwreck of their lives.
5. Conversion is the human response to God's offer of salvation; regeneration is the other side of the coin, the action of God Himself on a person's spirit. J.I.Packer says that in the *past* we have been saved from the penalty of sin; in the *present* we are being saved from the power of sin; in the *future* we will be saved from the presence of sin.
Regeneration is the first stage of salvation. We can see the results of this invisible act of God but *only God knows the human heart perfectly*. Participation in the Church is not the same as spiritual transformation which only happens gradually over time. The writer to the Hebrews is trying to *encourage* believers on this road.
6. We cannot safely use dialogue to manipulate people into the Kingdom. Such 'converts' are not likely to last. We must engage in sincere dialogue with those to whom we witness, *listening* to their questions, complaints and feelings.
7. Those who come to faith in our Christian communities need systematic preaching, teaching, discipleship and training.
8. All Christians are called into Christian service for life. This is at the same time a source of hope for us, *for God applauds our work*. Let us therefore show *diligence* right 'to the very end'.

Application of Hebrews

C H Spurgeon (*The Early Years* Banner of Truth, 1962, p. 48) read Hebrews as a teenager and concluded –

‘I have a very lively, or rather deadly, recollection of a certain series of discourses on the Hebrews, which made a deep impression on my mind of the most undesirable kind. I wished frequently that the Hebrews had kept the Epistle to themselves, for it sadly bored a poor Gentile lad’.

Many older people also feel bewildered by a world of ceremonial, priests and sacrifices, revolving around endless animal offerings and sacrificial gifts.

And yet, **vital issues** emerge from the pages of this letter –

- 1 *Biblical revelation* – strong focus on the word of God.
- 2 *Christ’s deity* is to be upheld and protected in our lives and ministries.
- 3 The *creation of humanity* (chapter 2).
- 4 The themes of *freedom and bondage* (also in chap. 2).
- 5 The issue of the ‘*scandal of particularity*’ ie the *uniqueness* of Christ in God’s saving purposes eg’s John 14:6; Acts 4:12. Almost everything in contemporary Western and non-Western thinking opposes Christ’s distinctiveness and uniqueness, especially where it involves His role in Creation and Redemption and His Supremacy over all religious systems/ ideas of salvation! Many systems either ignore Christ or give Him some sort of position in a hierarchy of mediators or channels for the procuring of blessing from the divine world. Jehovah’s Witnesses, regardless of their increasingly subtle forms of presentation of their claims, still deny the deity of Christ and the finality of His perfect work. J Hick (*The Myth of God Incarnate* editor, SCM Press, 1977, p.58) claimed that the greater the success of Martin Luther King and his willingness to suffer, so it became more likely that he risked assassination. Hick then states – ‘And so with Jesus. To live the life of love, to teach love, and to found the community of love *entailed* the likelihood of the cross’. Raymond Brown responds – “But this letter [Hebrews] asserts that Jesus did not die simply as a willing martyr for a good cause. It teaches not the mere ‘likelihood’ of the cross but its absolute necessity. He died in our place and without the shedding of His blood ‘there is no forgiveness of sins’ (8:22)”. The doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement, not surprisingly, is under severe and sustained attack in many parts of the Church and World. Concepts such as Sin, Satan,

Hell and Judgment are generally not ‘flavours of the month’ and are certainly not popular or ‘politically correct’ today.

- 6 *Purification for sins* through Christ’s death (1:3). This forms the basic plank of the whole central section of Hebrews Chapters 7-10. Humanity tries every possible escape route to run away from its accountability and responsibility for sin, but the guilt remains and needs to be dealt with! Sin traps us and makes us do things we would sometimes want to avoid doing; it makes us say things we would not want others to say to us; it makes us dwell on inner thoughts, our verbal expression of which would embarrass us no end if uttered publically! Our sense of guilt can be solved only by Christ’s forgiveness and hope.
- 7 The *purpose of life* in this world. There is widespread confusion and bewilderment, amongst many strata of society, about the meaning of life today. The writer reminds his readers from Psalm 8 that humankind is now not as God intended (Heb 2:8), but that God in His grace has sent Christ to set us free from this alienation and bondage, in a way that we ourselves could never achieve! Christ became like us (2:9,14) so that we could become like Him! He takes us from sin and selfishness into a new life and destiny, surrendered to Him for sacrifice and service in His world. We become His children and He will take us to glory (2:10-13) as/if we strive to continue and persevere in the faith.
- 8 *Death, Judgment and the Life to come*. People today, especially in the West, try to hide from the reality of death. Hebrews deals with lives that are ‘held in slavery by their fear of death’ (2:15). Hebrews teaches that Christ has won an eternal deliverance. Born as a baby (2:14; 10:5-9) but experienced death, entering our human anguish over death. He suffered and tasted death for everyone (2:9). Christ knew that Satan sought to make humans fear death and be overwhelmed by the uncertainty beyond death. Christ passed through death and overcame the powers of sin, death and the devil. He was raised by God from death and this has brought us peace and hope (13:20). Alongside these glorious truths, however, we need to deal with passages such as Hebrews 6:4-6, 10:26-31 and 13:4, with their strong reminders of the *judgment of God* as an unavoidable and undeniable reality, not only in the first century AD but also in our contemporary situations.
- 9 *The Christian life*. Hebrews addresses the issue of those who begin the Christian life with great promise but then drift away from faith or from the fellowship of Christ’s people. Some even make a point of deliberately rejecting faith. Heb 3-4 deal with this problem within the context of first-century apostasy. The writer is convinced that salvation is rooted in a

personal relationship with Christ expressed in repentance and faith (5:9). Yet at the same time, salvation is ongoing. It is not purely set in the past, though the past is important. We have been made holy (10:10) but we are being made holy (10:14). The writer stresses present and future. He saves now (7:25) but will return to bring salvation to those waiting for Him (9:28). We are called to believe and to continue by faith. It is our very perseverance in faith which validates and authenticates that faith.

- 10 The gospel is *demanding* in its call to discipleship. Christ defines discipleship in terms of taking up a cross, with denial and self-crucifixion. This is a radically different discipleship than presenting the Christian faith as the way to happiness, fulfillment or satisfaction. The way of the Cross as the way to glory also needs to be explained. Christ submitted Himself to God's will (5:7), learned obedience through suffering (5:8) and was 'made perfect' (5:9). We live today in a society that largely rejects the very idea of costly, painful and sacrificial living.
- 11 The Christian life can involve *isolation and opposition*. Hebrews portrays Christ as the sympathetic High Priest who can deal with such loneliness. Because He knew such hardship, He can enter into our 'weaknesses'. He is now Lord in heaven (4:14-15) and Son of God, yet He is also loving Son of Man who has been victorious in temptation when on earth. Hebrews speaks of a *man in heaven!* The opposition He faced means that He knows our feelings. We are never alone for He is our friend, always present, loving and strong (13:8).
- 12 *Comfort in Hebrews*. From 10:19, we meet believers caught up in the reality of first-century AD persecution. In 10:25 the writer reminds them of their fellow believers who had suffered previously and of the OT heroes of the faith and their successors in their struggles. We all need a renewed call to courage and a reminder of the faithfulness of God (11:11). We need a reminder of the past (11:1-40) and a vision of the future (12:22-29) – the unshakeable kingdom to which we belong.
- 13 The challenge of *practical Christian living*. The final six appeals to the believing readers of the Letter to the Hebrews:
 - (i) use your homes for God;
 - (ii) remember the pain of fellow Christian 'prisoners of conscience';
 - (iii) honour marriage as special and especially regarding sexual behaviour;
 - (iv) hold lightly to the things of this world;
 - (v) encourage church leaders;
 - (vi) beware of 'strange teachings'.All of these injunctions have powerful relevance for today.

- 14 The high importance of *fellowship*. The writer of Hebrews is very aware of the central importance of believers meeting together (10:25). Such regular relating with fellow believers stimulates mutual benefit - new energy, enthusiasm, warmth and determination to persevere even under the severest pressures. Much of Western society tends towards individualism, fed today by the relentless push in society towards an accompanying focus on personal rights, choices and powers. We need to recover a sense of the community nature of the Church which means that our selfish actions as individuals really *do* affect, restrict and damage the health and welfare of the community as a whole. Even our deliberate absence from the fellowship can deny benefit to those present!
- 15 Hebrews is a personal '*word of exhortation*' (13:22). The key to an understanding of Hebrews seems to be the writer's continual and repeated efforts to present the sheer majesty of Christ's person and work in such a way that will blow the minds of his readers/listeners, stir their hearts at the deepest possible level and move them to changed thinking, attitudes, actions and lifestyles, such that they will *continue in faith*, through pain and struggle, right *to the very end* of their lives. Alongside this focus, the writer comes across as one who is also learning humble and obedient servant-hood, evidenced by his frequent use of the phrase '*let us*'. He includes himself in the challenge of his own sermon! So surely must we as preachers now. Our own willingness, within God's Sovereign purposes, for suffering, sacrifice, self-discipline and self-denial will surely always be absolutely necessary, albeit painful, ingredients in our lives and ministries as pastors and preachers today.

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