

SESSION FIVE

OVERALL MESSAGE & THE WARNING PASSAGES

**QUESTION: What is the doctrinal center of the book?
(i.e., the fundamentally important fact)**

I. THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

A. Stated:

The traditional view of the book has stressed the high priesthood of Christ as the doctrinal center of the book.

B. Rationale

1. The explicit statement in 8:1 ("the main point . . . we have such a high priest")
2. The argument of the epistle is best understood as a development of this theme.
3. The details of the author's theology throughout relate to the theme of priesthood and cult.

II. ALTERNATE VIEWS

A. The sonship of Christ

B. The supremacy of Christ

C. The concept of covenant

D. Finality of Christianity (an apologetic for the superiority of the gospel over the Levitical system)

E. The contrast of the heavenly world of spiritual reality with the physical universe (Philonian dualism)

F. Eschatological (fulfillment of what was typical in the OT)

III. CRUCIAL QUESTION

A. In formulating a statement of the overall message, do we look to the theological expositions or to the paraenesis?

B. Some Proposals Stress Paraenesis

[for a summary, see MacLeod, "The Doctrinal Center," 296ff.]

1. Example: Käsemann's "pilgrim motif"

Käsemann proposed that the "pilgrim motif" was the focus of the book (the wandering of the people of God and their foreignness in this world)

2. Possible Support:

- a. The parallel to the wilderness generation coming out of Egypt (ch 3–4)

- b. Heb 11:13-16

"confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth"

"they desire a better *country*, that is a heavenly one"

3. Problems:

Käsemann's proposal fails to adequately incorporate the motifs of priesthood and cultus.

C. Towards a Solution

In attempting to express the overall message of the book, we must seek a solution which gives due justice to both the expositional parts as well as the paraenetic sections. In the expositional parts, the high priesthood of Christ is the dominant motif. In the paraenetic sections, the pilgrimage motif may have more dominance. Nevertheless, we would do well to acknowledge two things:

1. Although the high priesthood of Christ is uppermost in the author's thinking throughout most of the book, it does tend to taper off in the closing chapters of the book (i.e., it is not near as strong in chapters 11-13).
2. Although the paraenetic sections do have multiple references to what could be viewed as a "pilgrimage motif," we need to be honest to admit that these sections do not uniformly highlight this motif (they are not that simplistic).

IV. IDENTIFYING THE WARNING PASSAGES

A. Introduction

If we agree that the "warning passages" have a significant bearing on our understanding of the book, then it is imperative that we identify what these sections are in order to intelligently assess their influence. However, several have noted the fact that this can be a difficult task in itself. The *warnings* are often couched in larger exhortation sections mixed with encouragements. The transition from exposition to exhortation, warning or encouragement is often a subtle one. In fact, the author may at times move abruptly in and out of one to the other. Consequently, authors may define the limits of the warning sections differently, as reflected in the following table:

<u>IH Marshall</u>	<u>Toussaint</u>	<u>Z Hodges</u>	<u>Mugridge</u>	<u>McKnight</u>	<u>Oberholtzer</u>
2:1-4	2:1-4	2:1-4	2:1-4	2:1-4	2:1-4
3:7-4:13	3:7-4:13	3:1-4:16	3:12-4:2, 11-13	3:7-4:13	3:7-4:13
5:11-6:20	6:4-8	5:11-6:20	6:4-8	5:11-6:12	6:4-12
10:19-39	10:26-39	10:19-39	10:26-31	10:19-39	10:26-39
12:12-13:19	12:25-29	12:1-29 (warn= 12:18-29)	12:13b-17, 25-29	12:1-29 or 12:1-3,18-29	12:25-29

About the only place that we have uniform agreement is Heb 2:1-4. Since some of these sections are more intricately developed than others (there can be a mixture of exhortation, warning and encouragement), it is hard to make a firm decision. But for the purposes of discussion in this class, I opt to identify the warning sections as:

2:1-4

3:7-4:13

5:11-6:20 (5:11-6:20 is a unit mixing rebuke, exhortation, warning and hope; but 6:4-8 represents the heart of the warning)

10:19-39 (exhortation begins at vs 19 with the direct warning coming at vs 26)

12:14-29 (my decision here is admittedly tentative and may need adjustment later; but my initial thinking is that the exhortation comes in at 12:14 the preparation for the warning comes in at 12:18, and the heart of the warning itself in 12:25-29)

I commend McKnight for attempting to identify the components of these sections (audience, sin, exhortation, consequences — see pp 25-29). But even his analysis reflects that these sections are not uniform in their development of these components.

V. IMPORTANCE OF THE WARNING SECTIONS

- A. They are crucial to an understanding of the overall message of the book, i.e., they must be taken into account along with the expositional sections in order to get the full-orbed view.
- B. As McKnight has carefully argued, the warning sections cannot be viewed in isolation. They must be viewed synthetically, i.e., they present a collective message.
- C. There is an important theological outcome at stake: do the warning passages have *true regenerate believers* in view? The answer to this question has enormous implications for our theology of the Christian life (as well as eternal security).
 1. Here is a sampling of how people have answered that question:
 - a. True believers (though they may differ in what the consequences may be)
I. H. Marshall, Zane Hodges, Jody Dillow, McKnight, K. Oberholtzer, Wm. Lane, and Ellingworth

Note: Mugridge believes that true believers are in view, though he takes the warnings to be hypothetical (this will not happen in reality)
 - b. Unbelievers

Toussaint, Roger Nicole, and Robert Peterson
 2. Ellingworth's Evaluation

"The warnings are clearly not addressed to nominal Christians, but to those who have shared, as fully as it is possible to share in the present time, in the blessings which accompany and follow entry into the Christian life (6:4f.)" [p 75]

But he is *less than clear* on the matter of finality of salvation:

"The nature of apostasy is described, not merely passively, as 'neglect[ing] such a great salvation' (2:3), but actively, as a deliberate (ἐκοθσιως, 10:26) sin, which nullifies for the one who commits it the effect of Christ's sacrificial death (10:26, 29), and identifies the apostate with those humanly responsible for that death (6:6)." [p 75]

VI. VIEWS OF THE WARNING SECTIONS [compare McKnight, 23-25]

A. True Believer - Loss of Eternal Salvation View

The author is addressing true believers, and the sin of apostasy (recantation of Christ and His saving work) can possibly bring about a loss of salvation, with the result that such a person will eventually perish in hell. This is what makes it urgent to press on to maturity.

Proponents: I. H. Marshall, Scot McKnight, Wm. Lane, Paul Ellingworth

Note: Marshall (208-209) attempts to distance himself from classical Arminianism, because he doesn't want to sound as though persevering is man's work alone. God's promises and graces are rich towards those who trust in Him.

B. False Believer View

The author addresses a mixed audience, among whom are false believers. They have participated in some of the Spirit's preliminary work in their lives, but have not yet come as far as personal salvation in Christ. These are the ones in danger of committing apostasy, and thus stand in danger of hell. True believers, however, will not go to the extent of actual apostasy. Ultimately, they will persevere in the faith.

Proponents: Roger Nicole, Stanley Toussaint, Roger Peterson, John MacArthur, Philip E. Hughes, S. Lewis Johnson

C. True Believer - Hypothetical View

The author is addressing true believers, but he uses warnings that are only hypothetical (they don't really happen to anyone). These warnings are not real but are simply meant to motivate the reader to greater faithfulness, etc., by showing him what would happen if he were to reach the decisive stage of apostasy.

Proponents: Alan Mugridge, C. C. Ryrie [*Ryrie Study Bible*]

Note: T. Hewitt [Tyndale Comm.] views the warnings as hypothetical, but like view "B", he takes it that those addressed are not true believers.

D. Covenant Community View

Individual members of the church are not in view, but rather local covenant communities. Though the community as a whole may turn away from God's will, that does not necessarily mean the rejection of every individual.

Proponents: V. D. Verbrugge¹

E. True Believer - Negative Consequences for Future Salvation View

The author is addressing true believers, with concern for their immaturity and disobedience. Their present status may have significant negative implications for their future destiny with Christ, particularly if they go so far as to commit apostasy (turning their backs on Christ). Nevertheless, they will be eternally saved.

Proponents: Zane Hodges, Jody Dillow, and Kem Oberholtzer

¹V. D. Verbrugge, "Towards A New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6," *Calvin Theological Journal* 15 (1980): 61-73.

VII. CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

At this point, I do not want to delve into a detailed examination of all the warning passages and attempt to defend a particular view. I would rather get us all *thinking* at this point, so that we will be better prepared to engage in exegesis as we come to each passage in order. But here are a few questions to be thinking about:

A. Heb 2:1-4

1. How is "salvation" to be understood, and what is the connection to chapter one?
2. Does the Old Covenant "failure" have implications which are temporal (in the here and now) or eternal?
3. Does the fact that believers will not be judged for their sins preclude the possibility of any eschatological implications for their sin or disobedience in this life?

B. Heb 3:7–4:13

1. What kind of people were involved in Israel's sin depicted in Ps 95? What did disobedience mean for them, and what were the consequences?
2. Do we conclude by their example that none of the wilderness generation that failed to enter the land were *true believers*?
3. What is the "rest" and when is this operational?
4. Does failure/disobedience mean that one will miss God's rest altogether, or that one will fail to obtain their potential inheritance at that time?
5. What kind of "belief" (or unbelief) was in view for those depicted in Psalm 95? Is this looking at "soteriological faith"?

C. Heb 5:11–6:20

1. Does the concern about "maturity" affect our understanding of who is involved in the warning itself? In other words, what is the relationship between the rebuke about immaturity and the danger of not being able to repent.
2. Are the participles of 6:4ff. descriptive of believers or unbelievers?
3. Where does the chain of participles end? Does the participle about "falling away" have to be linked to the preceding ones?
4. Must the notion of "cursed" be taken as a reference to eternal damnation? Can this have any other connotation in the broader biblical context?
5. Is the reference to "burning" a picture of the flames of hell? What is the point of the illustration?
6. Can a believer be described as "worthless"?

D. Heb 10:19-39

1. What does the author have in mind by the expression "sinning willfully" (10:26)?
2. What OT passage serves as the basis of the "quotation" about judgment in 10:27? What kind of judgment was in view there?
3. Can God have a "severer punishment" in store for some true believers (10:29)? Would this be temporal or eternal?
4. If unbelievers are in view, how do you explain the phrase "by which he was sanctified"?
5. How is vs. 30 to be translated: "God will judge His people" or "God will vindicate His people." Which is to be preferred in the OT context? Which is to be preferred in the NT context?
6. Does "destruction" in vs. 39 have to speak of hell? What is the Greek word, and how is it used elsewhere? Is there a range of meanings or a single fixed meaning for the term?
7. What does it mean to "live" in the phrase "My righteous one shall live by faith"? Does this refer to the experiencing of eternal life (the result of justification and regeneration)? Since this is drawn from the OT, what could experiencing "life" mean in the OT?

E. Heb 12:12-29

1. What is the author's point in making a contrast between Mt. Sinai (where the Old Covenant was inaugurated) and Mt. Zion (which the New Covenant points to)?
2. Does this argue one way or the other for the identity of those who are in danger? If so, why?
3. What are they in danger of not escaping from?