

Chapter 9

Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Question of Christian Perseverance: A Case for Christian Rebellion Met by Temporal Judgment and Loss of Reward

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Admittedly, the interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6 is one of the most problematic passages in all the New Testament. Not surprisingly, this has generated numerous disparate interpretations, five of which have received particular attention.¹ These have been identified as

¹ Helpful surveys can be found in H. Bateman, ed., *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007); T. Schreiner and A. B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 19-45.

(1) the Loss of Salvation view (Arminian);² (2) the Hypothetical view;³ (3) the Tests of Genuineness view (classical Reformed);⁴ (4) the Means of Salvation view⁵ (which is a variation of the Tests of Genuineness view); and (5) the Loss of Rewards view.⁶ These five primary views are

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- 2 Notable proponents include I. H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God* (London: Epworth, 1969), 137–57; Ibid., “The Problem of Apostasy in New Testament Theology,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 14.4 (1987): 65–80; G. Osborne, “Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. C. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 144–66; Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal* 13 (Spring 1992): 21–59; Gareth L. Cockerill, “A Wesleyan Arminian View,” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, ed. H. W. Bateman IV (Kregel, 2007), 257–92; Ibid., *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).
 - 3 See Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Tyndale NT Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 108; C. C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, comments on Heb. 6:4–6.
 - 4 This is the traditional Reformed position. Representative proponents include Roger Nicole, “Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Doctrine of Perseverance of God with the Saints,” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1975): 355–64; Robert A. Peterson, “Apostasy,” *Presbyterion* 19 (Spring 1993): 17–31; Wayne Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from the Warning Passages in Hebrews,” in *Still Sovereign*, ed. T. R. Schreiner and B. A. Ware (Baker, 2000), 133–82; and Buist M. Fanning, “A Classical Reformed View,” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, ed. H. W. Bateman IV (Kregel, 2007), 172–219.
 - 5 See G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 118–21; M. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1005; T. Schreiner and A. B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us*, esp. 38–45; 142–213; T. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: B&H Publ., 2015); Christopher W. Cowan, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews and the New Covenant Community,” in *Progressive Covenantalism*, ed. S. J. Wellum and B. E. Parker (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 189–213.
 - 6 Thomas K. Oberholtzer, “The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4–12; Part 3 of The Warning Passages in Hebrews,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145:579 (July–September 1988): 319–328; J. Paul Tanner, “But If It Yields Thorns and

carefully explained and evaluated by David Allen in his commentary, and, therefore, I will not attempt to repeat that information here.⁷ But for the sake of clarification, the Means of Salvation view (popularized by Schreiner and Caneday) declares that the warnings of Hebrews 6:4-6 and other like passages are addressed to true Christians, but these are used by God, along with other divine promises, as the means by which he preserves his saints. That is, the warnings stimulate them not to *fall away* (and hence, genuine Christians do not). Although the forensic nature of justification is correctly affirmed in this view, they argue (incorrectly) that final justification awaits the completion of a life of perseverance. Such a view is certainly unbiblical, and Allen has correctly refuted the view in his commentary.⁸ The position advocated in this presentation is a form of the Loss of Rewards view. Unfortunately, that label is insufficient, for it does not reflect the temporal judgment that properly accompanies it (more than loss of rewards are involved). Also, my particular expression of this view will differ on certain details from others holding the same general view. The purpose of this presentation, then, is to explain the meaning of Hebrews 6:4-6 in its biblical context. Furthermore, since all five major

Thistles': An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11-6:12," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14:26 (Spring 2001): 19-42; Ibid., "The Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, vol. 2 (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 1031-98; Randall C. Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155:617 (January-March 1998): 62-91; Ibid., "A Moderate Reformed View," in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, ed. H. W. Bateman IV (Kregel, 2007), 336-77. Although Gleason takes the view that the impending temporal judgment is the approaching destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (which differs from my view), he correctly understands the warnings to be aimed at rebellious Jewish Christians. His articles are extremely helpful in showing the Old Testament background to the warning passages, particularly the events at Kadesh-barnea in Numbers 13-14. For a thorough and more recent treatment of the Loss of Rewards view, see David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2010); and Joseph C. Dillow, *Final Destiny; the Future Reign of the Servant Kings* (Grace Theology Press, 2013), 639-58.

7 Allen, *Hebrews*, 370-86.

8 Ibid., 373-76.

views consider the audience to be genuine Christians except for the Tests of Genuineness view (classical Reformed), I will give particular attention to interacting with advocates of that persuasion, especially Wayne Grudem's treatment.⁹

The Context of Hebrews 6:4-6 in Relation to the Author's Argument

Hebrews 1:1–7:28 forms the first major movement of the book of Hebrews. The author's thesis throughout this section is that the new covenant is superior to the old because of the superior person (God's Son) upon which it is based. He develops this thesis through three major units. In Hebrews 1:1–2:18, the Son is superior to the angels who mediated the old covenant. In Hebrews 3:1–5:10, the Son is superior to Moses through whom the old covenant came, and has a superior role compared to Joshua in leading God's people to the future greater "rest." This greater rest is not the mere land of Canaan, but the privilege that faithful believers will have to enjoy their eternal rest and inheritance in the future messianic kingdom.¹⁰ Finally, in 5:11–7:28, the Son (as

9 For other critiques of Grudem from a slightly different perspective (Means of Salvation view), see Christopher W. Cowan, "Confident of Better Things': Assurance of Salvation in the Letter to the Hebrews" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 175-99; and T. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 182-86.

10 The *kingdom theme* was introduced as early as chapter one, especially vv. 8-9 where the Son's kingdom is explicitly mentioned. This suggests that the Son's appointment in 1:2 as "heir of all things" (an allusion to the messianic promise of Psalm 2:8 for God's king-designate) will find its fulfillment in this new world order. This, then, is "the world to come" that our author mentions in 2:5, and which he refers to directly in 12:28 as "a kingdom which cannot be shaken."

The concept of "rest" (κατάπαυσις) in Hebrews 4:1—where the author is concerned that some of his readers might come short of "entering his rest"—must not be interpreted as *being saved and going to heaven* (so F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 110; Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 161-62). The "rest" in chapter four depends on Psalm 95

High Priest) has a superior ministry to those of the Levitical priestly ministry. The predominant view throughout church history has been that the audience consists of Jewish Christians, which would explain the unusually heavy emphasis upon Old Testament quotations and allusions, reference to Old Testament persons and institutions, as well as the need to belabor the point that the old covenant has been replaced by the new.¹¹ That the audience are also Jews who had placed their faith in Jesus as Messiah is attested in the way he describes them as “holy brethren” (3:1), building on the argument in Hebrews 2:11 that Christ is not ashamed to call those who are sanctified “brethren.”¹²

for its analogy, which in turn refers back to the Old Testament believers who rebelled at Kadesh-barnea and consequently forfeited their *inheritance rest* of the land (see Deut. 12:8-10). According to Hebrews 4:11, these Old Testament rebels failed on account of their “disobedience.” The author also asserts in Hebrews 4:11 that believers today must be “diligent” (σπουδάζω) to enter God’s future “rest,” a term that implies “making every effort” (hardly a call to the gospel message for salvation from sins). In Hebrews 4:9, the author speaks uniquely of this future rest as a “Sabbath rest” (σαββατισμός, a NT hapax legomenon). “Here the repose typified by the Sabbath is seen as the spiritual rest to be realized fully in the life to come, ‘for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from his’ (4:10 NRSV)” (Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2nd ed., [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014], 4:223).

11 Other arguments could easily be advanced to substantiate the audience as Jewish. The book begins with the note that God had spoken in days past to “the fathers” (Heb. 1:1). The superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood and its replacement of the Levitical priesthood would have little significance to pagan converts (note Heb. 7:11). The author felt a need to insist on the superiority of Christ’s blood to that of sacrificial animals (e.g., 9:13-14).

12 There is no need to make a distinction between the author’s reference to his audience as “holy brethren” (ἀδελφοὶ ἅγιοι, which only occurs here in Heb. 3:1) and elsewhere as simply “brethren” (pl. of ἀδελφός; so Heb. 2:11, 12, 17; 3:12; 10:19; 13:1, 22). Hebrews 3:1 begins with the author drawing a conclusion (note Ὅθεν) based on his expository comments in the previous chapter in which he had made the point in Hebrews 2:11 that “those who are sanctified” (οἱ ἁγιαζόμενοι, a cognate term to ἅγιοι) are now Jesus’s “brethren” (ἀδελφοὺς). In light of the way the author has used the term “brethren” in Hebrews 2:11, the word is *theologically loaded* in the epistle to indicate

Yet they are also a particular community of believers, for they have a definite history (6:10; 10:32-34), some of their original leaders had died off (13:7), and the author had intentions of visiting them (13:23). Nevertheless, some of the community were in danger of drifting from the preaching of their original leaders (13:7-9), and apparently some of them had already come to the point of forsaking their assembling together with fellow believers (10:25). The primary cause appears to be the fact that they were facing severe persecution for their faith (10:32-34). Perhaps some were also becoming dismayed at the delay of Christ's parousia, since the author felt a need to remind them that "he who is coming will come, and will not delay" (10:37).

In the second major unit (3:1-5:10), the author felt pressed to remind this wavering community of Jewish believers that a previous generation of the nation (namely, those who came out of Egypt with Moses) had rebelled against God by refusing to enter the Promised Land and subsequently experienced temporal judgment by God (their "bodies fell in the wilderness," 3:17). Therefore, the author—calling them "brethren"—warned them there must not be in any one of them an evil heart of unbelief in *falling away* from the living God (3:12). What might lead to such falling away would be the hardening of their hearts by the deceitfulness of sin (3:13). For that reason, they must "hold fast the beginning of their assurance firm until the end" (3:14). [Notice that the solution is to *hold fast* (not repent and be saved), an exhortation which the author reiterates in Hebrews 10:19-24]. The point in reviewing the overall context and the author's concern for the audience is that there is a consistent concern for their perseverance in faith. He lays it on the line (so to speak) in Hebrews 10:35-36 with this exhortation:

Therefore, do not throw away your confidence (παρρησίαν),¹³
which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so

genuine believers (he is not merely accommodating himself politely to a mixed audience).

13 This "confidence" is not a self-confidence, but as explained in a preceding verse (Hebrews 10:19) a confidence (παρρησίαν) that the brethren have of entering the (heavenly) holy place by the blood of Jesus.

that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

Their need was not salvation from the penalty of their sins but to endure in faith and not retreat from their confession, so that they might ultimately inherit all that God had promised. While this does not prove the spiritual state of those being addressed in Hebrews 6:4-6, it certainly creates an expectation of their identity—barring any evidence to the contrary. A closer look at the preceding context of Hebrews 6:4-6 strengthens and affirms the fact that they are genuine believers.

Hebrews 5:11–7:28 (the general context for Hebrews 6:4-6), constitutes the third major unit of the book, in which the author argues for the superiority of Christ's priestly ministry to that of the Levitical priestly ministry. He senses, however, that this will be a much more difficult task, given the spiritual condition of his readers. They will need to be able to comprehend deeper spiritual truth, if they are to bear with him. They will need to be able to understand the Melchizedekian priesthood and its relationship to the old covenant priesthood based on Aaron and the tribe of Levi. Yet that is just the problem; the readers (at least a number of them) are not at a level of spiritual maturity to comprehend the significance of his argument. So, before diving into more detail about Christ in relationship to the Melchizedekian priesthood (which he will return to in 7:1), the author pauses to address the danger that their spiritual immaturity poses, and the risk they face of incurring God's judgment which ultimately will prevent them "inheriting God's promises" (Hebrews 6:12). Persistence in immaturity and resistance to moving forward can potentially lead—as it did with the wilderness generation at Kadesh-barnea—to hardness of heart and ultimately God intervening with temporal judgment. From the standpoint of the literary structure, the more immediate context for Hebrews 6:4-6 is the *pericope* defined as Hebrews 5:11–6:12, and for that reason the detailed discussion must begin at 5:11.

The Statement Of Their Spiritual Problem (5:11-14)

The author confronts the problem of his readers head-on when he says, “you have become dull (νωθοὶ) of hearing” (5:11). The word νωθρός means *slow* or *sluggish*.¹⁴ They are sluggish hearers in that they do not hear well when it comes to comprehending spiritual truth. The adjective νωθρός is important to our evaluation of this whole unit, since it occurs only one other time in the New Testament, and that is in Hebrews 6:12. What we have, then, is an *inclusio* with νωθρός marking the beginning and ending points of the *pericope*.

5:11 “you are *dull/sluggish* (νωθοὶ) of hearing”

6:12 “that you might not be *sluggish* (νωθοὶ), but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises”

This observation of the *inclusio* is highly significant. There is no change of *addressee* in this unit of Hebrews 5:11–6:12. The ones he describes as *sluggish* in 5:11 are the same ones he continues to be concerned for all the way until 6:12. The point becomes quite clear at 6:12—he does not want to see them remain *sluggish*, but “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”

Furthermore, their *sluggishness* is not simply a matter of their being “baby Christians” but rather a result of failure to make progress in the Christian life as they should have. This is rather obvious from a fair reading of Hebrews 5:12. “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.” He then closes the paragraph by stating that solid food is for those who are mature, for in their case, their *senses* (αἰσθητήρια) have been trained for distinguishing between good and evil.¹⁵ One who would desire the “solid food” of God’s Word must realize that

14 νωθρός does occur three times in the LXX (Prov. 22:29; Sir. 4:29; 11:12). The idea of “sluggish” is seen, for example, in Sirach 4:29 (=Ecclesiasticus) where it is contrasted with the idea of “hasty”: “Be not hasty in thy tongue, and in thy deeds slack (νωθρός) and remiss.”

15 “Senses” means the inner part of man where moral reasoning takes place (4 Macc. 2:22; see Jeremiah 4:19).

he cannot gain it apart from the process of maturing—a process that requires difficult training. The idea of stressful “training” is suggested by the word γυμνάζω (from which we get our English word gymnasium), meaning to exercise or train. But this maturing process is worth the price one pays, for in this way he comes to distinguish good and evil. This thought sets the stage for the author’s exhortation in 6:1 in which he urges them to move on to maturity.

The Call To Maturity (6:1-3)

The Readers Must Choose the Goal of Maturing (6:1a)

The conjunction Διὸ (“Therefore”) at the beginning of verse one underscores the connection to the preceding paragraph and suggests that pressing on to maturity is the only logical inference for the readers to make. They need to leave behind the elementary teaching about the promised Messiah and press on to maturity. The very fact that the author exhorts them to “press on” clarifies that there is still hope and opportunity for them to do so. But this is the decisive moment in which they must choose which way they are going to go [note that he is not suggesting a continued diet of “milk” for them]. Any appeals or inclinations they may have received to leave the faith and abandon their confession of Jesus as Messiah (note 3:6, 14; 4:14; 10:23) must be rejected in preference to the goal of maturing.

The Remedy is Not to Be Found in Laying Again the Foundational Truths (6:1b-2)

The author is not suggesting that the foundational truths they had learned about Messiah must now be discarded, as though they were unimportant. Rather, he is suggesting that these should not be re-laid. His readers must put their efforts into moving beyond these basic teachings that they had already come to know.

There is debate as to whether the teachings mentioned in these verses pertain to Jewish or Christian matters of faith. Lane points out that the latter option has been questioned

on the ground that in none of the six items mentioned in 6:1–2 is there any reference to anything specifically Christian

(e.g., Adams, *NTS* 13 [1966-67] 379-84; Weeks, *WTJ* 39 [1976] 74-76). Each of the articles, however, is related to the high priestly Christology developed in the subsequent chapters, which makes explicit the christological structure of the foundation.¹⁶

The correct interpretation is probably not an either/or matter (i.e., that the teachings were either totally Jewish or totally Christian). Given the Jewish background of the readers, their faith in the Lord Jesus and participation in the new covenant called for a radical reassessment of their previous understanding of spiritual matters. In other words, their Jewish worldview needed to be recast and given new understanding in light of the new covenant Jesus Christ inaugurated.

The mention of “dead works” in v. 1 does not pertain to human works of the flesh in general, but more specifically to the external regulations of the Levitical cultus.¹⁷ This is confirmed by the use of the phrase “dead works” in Hebrews 9:14 (the only other use of the phrase), in which the accomplishment of Christ’s sacrifice is said to do so much more than Levitical sacrifices ever could. The “dead works,” then, represent the efforts connected with the earthly sanctuary system to secure cleansing and acceptance before God. Now that the Messiah had come and made a perfect sacrifice (one that did not merely provide *external cleansing* but even made possible the cleansing of the conscience), those Jewish believers who turned to Christ repented of (changed their mind about) the Levitical approach to God and adjusted their theology to place their faith completely in the Lord Jesus as the sure and final atonement for their sins.

16 William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47A (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991), 1:140. See R. C. Sauer, “A Critical and Exegetical Reexamination of Hebrews 5:11-6:8” (Ph.D. diss., University of Manchester, 1981), 176-78.

17 Contra F. F. Bruce who holds that “they are works which issue in death because they are evil” (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 140).

Other teachings had to be adjusted in light of Messiah's coming as well. The four items remaining in v. 2 are all grammatically related to the word *instruction*, which in turn is related to *foundation* in v. 1:

Not laying again a foundation

1. of repentance from dead works and faith toward God
2. of instruction about:
 - ritual washings
 - laying on of hands
 - resurrection of the dead
 - eternal judgment

The word *washings* (βαπτισμῶν) probably does not refer to Christian baptism but to Levitical washings connected with the cultus (note the use of βαπτισμοῖς in the plural in Hebrews 9:10). The "laying on" of hands was commonly practiced under the old covenant. This was associated with sacrifices (e.g., Leviticus 4:15 [by elders]; 8:14 [by priests]; and 16:21 [by the high priest on the Day of Atonement]). Also, hands were laid on the Levites when consecrating them to ministry (Numbers 8:10). Lane states,

The discrimination between useless washings on the one hand and purification by the blood of Christ on the other (9:9–10, 19; 10:22), or between priests appointed by the imposition of hands according to the law, which in its weakness could not achieve the perfection of the people of God, and the high priest appointed by the oath of God and the power of an indestructible life (5:1–6; 7:5, 15–28) demonstrates the relationship between the foundational teaching and the advanced instruction provided in 7:1–10:18.¹⁸

Whatever understanding they previously had about resurrection and eternal judgment now had to be corrected in light of Messiah's coming. There was certainly a resurrection; since he had been resurrected, so

¹⁸ Lane, 1:140.

they would be also. Furthermore, the Father had entrusted all judgment into his hands (John 5:22). For believers, they must be prepared for giving an account of themselves at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10), while unbelievers will face condemnation to hell at the Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11).

Yet these foundational matters had already been dealt with in days past. There was no need to cover this ground again, but rather to “press on.”

There is a Danger That the Readers May Not be Able to Press On (6:3)

Having mentioned the eschatological issue of “eternal judgment,” the author suddenly stops his enumeration of what he considers “elementary teaching.” The thought of judgment is a sober reminder of the potential danger his readers faced. If their present situation is not corrected, God himself may not permit them to “press on to maturity.” This would surely result in a negative judgment experience for them, as the thought of “not permitting them” harks back to the experience of the wilderness generation coming out of Egypt that the author had previously commented on in Hebrews 3–4. They were not “permitted” to enter Canaan, and now this present generation of Jewish Christians faces a similar predicament, if they fail to make the right choice.

The phrase *if God permits* in 6:3, then, raises a note of alarm. While there is still the possibility of “pressing on,” they must be confronted that they are dangerously close to grave spiritual disaster. Hence, in 6:4–6 the author will now confront them with the possible outcome that their spiritual lethargy and resistance to maturing could lead to.

The Danger Of “Falling Away” (6:4-8)

Though the readers desperately need to go on to maturity, the author issues a warning that *in some cases* this may not be possible. Hence, in 6:4–6 he describes a situation in which the readers might commit an offense so serious that God would not permit them to move on to maturity. This offense is described in 6:6 as “falling away” (παραπεσόντας). The seriousness of this sin of “falling away” has

prompted great debate as to (1) whether genuine Christians are truly in view (can a Christian do such a thing?); and (2) what exactly is the judgment in store for anyone who might do this. In general, Reformed theologians have assumed that the ones described in 6:4-5 are not even genuine Christians. Yet some who take the Reformed view of these verses have admitted that they certainly *seem to* describe genuine Christian experience. Commenting on the descriptive participles in vv. 4-5 Fanning writes,

On the face of it these seem to reflect different facets of a full experience of true Christian conversion. This is confirmed when parallel uses of the key words here are tracked down in other passages in Hebrews. . . . The sense of these phrases individually and their cumulative force when taken together have led many to the perfectly plausible conclusion that the people in view in 6:4b-5 are genuine Christians.¹⁹

Grudem concurs and states that “[t]he cumulative force of these terms can also be used as an argument to show that these people were genuine Christians before falling away.”²⁰ For different reasons, however, both Fanning and Grudem go on to argue that despite the appearance that genuine Christians are in view, they conclude they are not. Their logic and arguments will be evaluated after first considering the exegetical details of Hebrews 6:4-5.

Theologians from the Arminian camp take the position that genuine Christians are in view but view the sin as apostasy resulting in their loss of salvation. Yet there is nothing in the passage that explicitly states—if they were to do this—that they would lose their salvation, any more than the sin of the wilderness generation meant loss of salvation for them, and certainly the author still has this old covenant failure in mind that he had brought to their attention in chapter three. Continuing the analogy, however, they may face temporal judgment

19 Fanning, “A Classical Reformed View,” 177.

20 Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” 139.

and loss of their inheritance (as was true for the wilderness generation according to Psalm 95).²¹

As serious as the sin may be, however, the author is not actually charging his readers as having yet gone to that extent. Three observations confirm this: (1) he offers the possibility of “pressing on” in 6:1; (2) he makes a subtle shift from the first person in 6:1–3 to a less direct way by use of the third person in 6:4–6, and (3) he reaffirms his confidence in them in 6:9. Nevertheless, he recognizes that they are on a perilous path, and they need to quickly gain their senses and realize the seriousness of what is at stake. If they do not shake out of their spiritual lethargy, they may very well end up as one of those described in Hebrews 6:4–8.

The Spiritual State of the Offenders (6:4-5)

Verses 4–6 must be seen as one complete unit of thought. In the Greek text, the emphatic word *impossible* (Ἀδύνατον) is placed up front in v. 4, while the complement *to restore again to repentance* does not come until v. 6. In between, we have a series of five participles describing those who cannot be renewed to repentance. The first four are positive statements of their Christian experience, while the fifth and last (“have fallen away”) in v. 6 is negative.

Significantly, all five participles are governed by the one definite article τοὺς in v. 4, which serves to unite them. As a result, these are not two different situations, but a single situation in which the one who “falls away” is the very one who had been enlightened, etc. The postpositive γὰρ at the beginning of v. 4, then, serves to connect v. 3 with the entire following paragraph and explains why, in some cases, God may not permit one to advance further to maturity if the situation described in vv. 4–6 proves true.

21 Although the wilderness generation rebelled at Kadesh-barnea, this did not mean that they lost their *eternal salvation*, but only that they forfeited their earthly inheritance as part of God’s temporal judgment on them. According to Numbers 14:19–20, the LORD pardoned (סָלַח) the people of their iniquity following Moses’s intercessory prayer for them. If they had lost their eternal salvation, God’s subsequent forgiving of their iniquity would have been superfluous.

Lane is undoubtedly correct when he states, "Together, the clauses describe vividly the reality of the experience of personal salvation enjoyed by the Christians addressed."²² This is true for at least three basic reasons: (1) the author had expressed statements of concern about his readers in earlier portions of the epistle (e.g., Hebrews 3:12) while yet referring to them as "brethren;" (2) what he has to say about them in 6:4-6 cannot be divorced from what he has said about them at the beginning of this literary unit in 5:11-14, namely, that they are spiritual babes who have not matured; and (3) the terminology in 6:4-5 is most naturally descriptive of Christian experience, not of unbelievers.

To claim that they have merely professed to believe (in response to pre-salvation enlightenment), while yet remaining unregenerate, is to force one's theology on the text rather than allowing the text to speak for itself. Randall Gleason is precisely on target when he points out that this passage must be understood in light of its Old Testament background.²³ In particular, the author is still making allusions to the event that occurred at Kadesh-barnea:

Most important to this study is the writer's use in chapters 3-4 of the Exodus generation at Kadesh-barnea (Ps 95:7b-11) as a type of the Christian community to which he was writing. In each case the Old Testament record of God's dealings in earlier redemptive history is used to bring understanding to the present situation of his readers.²⁴

Gleason substantiates this claim by pointing out numerous instances of the author's use of the pilgrimage motif following chapter six.²⁵

²² Lane, 1:141.

²³ Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8." According to Gleason, the Old Testament is cited at least 38 times in Hebrews, and Longenecker has identified at least 55 additional allusions to the Old Testament (Richard Longenecker, "Hebrews and the Old Testament," in *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 166-70).

²⁴ Gleason, 66.

²⁵ See especially pp. 72-75 in Gleason.

The fateful decision of the wilderness generation at Kadesh-barnea the Old Testament counterpart to a decision by those under the new covenant who would rebel and “fall away” from God.

The author’s first statement about his readers in this verse is that they had been “enlightened” (φωτισθέντας). The author uses this term on other time in Hebrews 10:32 where he says, “after being enlightened you endured a great conflict of sufferings.” The context deals with the sufferings for the faith, a situation which would surely point to the regenerate state, for it is hardly imaginable that they (especially being first century Jews) would suffer persecution had they not truly come to know the Savior.

Secondly, he points out that they had “tasted” (γευσαμένους) the heavenly gift. Some have tried to argue that they had only “tasted” but had not fully partaken of, and hence were only *professing Christians*. The Greek verb γεύομαι, however, does not restrict itself to such limited meaning. Furthermore, the author has already used the same verb in Hebrews 2:9 in reference to Christ having “tasted death for everyone.” We would have quite a theological dilemma on our hands if Christ merely tasted death for us but did not fully undergo it. The Scripture is quite clear, however, that he fully experienced death for our sins.

As Ellingworth has noted, the author is using the word to mean “eat,” not merely taste, and hence figuratively to “experience (to the full).”²⁶ Possibly, by the phrase *tasted the heavenly gift*, the author has in mind that they had partaken of God’s free gift of eternal life in Christ (see John 4:10; Romans 6:23). As the wilderness generation ate of the heavenly provision of manna, so these new covenant believers have eaten the greater heavenly manna—the “bread of life” (John 6:33).

Thirdly, he states that his readers had been made “partakers or “partners with” the Holy Spirit. The word *partakers/partners* is the Greek word μετόχους, a word that was used earlier in 3:1 of the “holy brethren” who were participants in a heavenly calling and in 3:14 of those who had become partners with Christ by holding fast to

²⁶ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews; A Commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 320.

confidence.²⁷ In Hebrews 6:4, the readers are “partakers of the Holy Spirit,” because they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed. The Holy Spirit was God’s “pledge” (or earnest payment) until the day of redemption when they would receive their resurrected bodies (Ephesians 1:13–14; Romans 8:23).

Fourthly, he says in 6:5 that they had “tasted (γευσάμενους) the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come.” The word *tasted* is the same Greek word as used in v. 4, hence a true experiencing of. The Christian message had come to them accompanied by miraculous confirmations which they fully experienced (recall 2:3–4).

The Reformed Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-5 Evaluated and Refuted

Despite these clear affirmations in vv. 4-5 that testify of their status as genuine Christians, theologians from the Reformed position generally deny that this is the case. Grudem, for example, though admitting that the participles in vv. 4-5 *could* be descriptive of genuine Christians, argues that they *could also be* descriptive of non-Christians, and therefore reasons from that premise that the ones in view were actually never saved.²⁸ The terms are “inconclusive,” he argues, because had they truly become Christians, the text should have said *more* to this effect. For instance, the text does not say clearly that they had trusted in Christ for salvation, and whether their lives showed fruit that gives evidence of true salvation.²⁹

27 The translation “shared in the Holy Spirit” given by the NIV (as though to suggest that the guilty ones had only participated in some of the Spirit’s ministry rather than having received the Holy Spirit himself) is too weak in light of the use of the term in Hebrews 3:1 and would better be rendered “partakers of the Holy Spirit.”

28 Grudem states that “this alternative view would argue that the terms in verses 4-6 by themselves are inconclusive, for they speak of events that are experienced both by genuine Christians and by some people who participate in the fellowship of a church but are never really saved” (“Perseverance of the Saints,” 139).

29 Ibid., 140.

Grudem goes to great length to argue that the first participle, “have been enlightened” (φωτισθέντας) is inconclusive because most of the instances of the verb φωτίζω in the New Testament (used 11x) are not used in a soteriological sense but rather in a general sense of bringing something to light. While I readily agree that the word is not a technical term, Grudem too easily dismisses the obvious fact that it is used soteriologically in the only other instance in the book of Hebrews where it is used, namely, Hebrews 10:32: “But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened (φωτισθέντες), you endured a great conflict of sufferings.” Grudem denies that this means they had heard and believed the gospel, but such a conclusion overlooks the fact that in view of first century AD Judaism, one would hardly have suffered for a faith he did not really possess.³⁰ So while the verb φωτίζω is not a technical term for soteriological enlightenment, it certainly can be, and Hebrews 10:32 (addressed to the same audience) shows that the author of Hebrews does indeed use it this way. This is further substantiated by the following context in Hebrew 10, especially vv. 35-36. Notice that the author does not tell the readers in this context that they need to be truly saved or justified. Rather he says, “Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.” His remedy for these suffering saints is to have an enduring faith, not for initial saving faith in the gospel message.

In Hebrews 6:4-5, Grudem also asserts that the participle “have tasted” (γευσάμενους) in the phrases “have tasted of the heavenly gift” and “have tasted the good word of God” does not reflect that those addressed were truly saved. He states, “Inherent in the idea of *geuomai* when it means ‘taste’ are two factors: (1) the tasting is temporary, and (2) a more permanent experience of the thing might or might not follow.”³¹ From this, he goes on to assert that “mere tasting does not

30 Ibid., 141. Grudem (144) tries to dodge the weight of this evidence when he states, “We cannot establish a specialized sense for *phōtizō* in Hebrews in this way, for it is used only one other time in Hebrews, while it occurs nine other times in the rest of the New Testament.” Yet the context of Hebrews 10 does indicate that the author is using *phōtizō* in this way.

31 Ibid., 145.

mean that they have made these things their own possession.”³² Grudem acknowledges that the only other use of γεύομαι in Hebrews 2:9 reflects genuine experiencing (“But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, *namely*, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone”).³³ Nevertheless Grudem insists, “The fact more important for our discussion is that the common factor in all instances of tasting is that the tasting is a temporary experience, not a continuing one, and it sometimes (or often) results in no permanent experience or permanent change in the person doing the tasting.”³⁴ Grudem's comment, however, overlooks the main issue: the point is that, no matter the length of the experience involved in the tasting, it does often lead to a true resultant state. For example, in Matthew 16:28 we read: “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste (γεύσονται) death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” This is obviously not a false or insufficient experience of death; once dead, they would be *truly dead*, not a state short of being dead.

Grudem's claim that γεύομαι in Hebrews 6:4-5 does not mean that the readers had made these things their own possession (see above) is an invalid lexical assertion about the word. In 1 Peter 2:3, Peter speaks of growing in respect to salvation “if you have tasted (ἐγεύσασθε) the kindness of the Lord.” Obviously, by this expression, Peter implies that his readers had entered into a true relationship with the Lord based on saving faith. It is at this point regarding “genuine experience” that Grudem's logic founders. He writes,

Similarly, in Hebrews 6:4-6 the people had a genuine experience of the heavenly gift and the word of God and the powers of the age to come. But that is not the point. The question is whether they

³² Ibid.

³³ Another helpful example is Matthew 27:34: “they gave him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting (γευσάμενος) it, he was unwilling to drink.” Yes, it was a mere taste, but Jesus truly had the wine, not a false experience of it.

³⁴ Ibid., 145, fn. 27.

had a *saving* experience of these things, whether the experience was one that brought regeneration, saving faith, justification, etc.³⁵

Yet Grudem fails to adequately explain how one can have a *genuine experience* of the heavenly gift without being saved. By analogy, how can one be said to experience justification without truly being justified? Grudem tries to dodge the meaning of “tasted the heavenly gift” when he claims that they have had some experience of the *power* of the Holy Spirit, yet that is not what the text says but only what Grudem wants to read into it. This leads him to conclude, “the tasting of the heavenly gift, and the word of God, and the coming powers, was temporary, and we cannot tell from the mere fact of such tasting if a more permanent experience of these things followed or not.”³⁶ That, however, is a false conclusion. The context *strongly* argues that the readers had had a permanent experience of these things, for the author had just exhorted these readers who were “sluggish” to move on to maturity (Hebrews 5:11–6:2).

According to Hebrews 6:4 those being warned are also said to have been made μετόχους of the Holy Spirit, translated “partakers” by the NASB (the ESV says they have “shared in the Holy Spirit”). Grudem; however, argues that “they were partakers of some of the *benefits* that the Holy Spirit gives” (emphasis mine).³⁷ The word μέτοχος means either (1) adjectivally, to share or participate in; or (2) substantively, a (business) partner or companion.³⁸ Yet to share in the Holy Spirit is not the same thing as sharing in *the benefits of* the Holy Spirit, and Grudem’s interpretation does not hold up to close exegetical scrutiny. First, in other instances when μέτοχος is followed by a genitive of person(s), it does not mean to share in the benefits provided by that person but

³⁵ Ibid., 146.

³⁶ Ibid., 147.

³⁷ Ibid., 148.

³⁸ Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 643. [Hereafter, BDAG].

rather in having an intimate relationship with that person (see Psalm 119:63; Hebrews 3:14). Second, a similar syntactical structure is found in Hebrews 3:14 involving μέτοχος, a form of the verb γίνομαι, and a genitive of person (μέτοχοι γὰρ τοῦ Χριστοῦ γεγόναμεν), and yet Grudem would not translate 3:14 “we have become partakers of *the benefits* of Christ.”³⁹ This inconsistency of translation shows the weakness of his interpretation. Third, Hebrews 6:4 indicates that the addressees were “*made* sharers/partakers” (μετόχους γενηθέντας), the passive verb meaning they were *acted upon* by God, suggesting it was not an action on their part but what God had done to them (what he had made to happen). Logically this would suggest they were believers, since God can hardly be thought of as *making* them partake of the benefits of the Holy Spirit while stopping short of partaking of the person of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, Grudem’s thesis that the participles of Hebrews 6:4-5 are “inconclusive” fails for several reasons. First, the author shows no change of subject in moving from 5:11 through 6:5; they were clearly believers who had not sufficiently matured in the faith. The author had already confronted them, telling them that they were “sluggish” and had had sufficient time in the faith to have progressed further by now (“by this time you ought to be teachers,” 5:12). Second, the solution for their sluggishness according to Hebrews 6:1-3 was to press on to maturity, while there was a danger that some might not be able to do so on account of what 6:4-6 describes. Had they been non-Christians this would be irrelevant, for non-Christians rather obviously cannot move on to maturity. Third, drawing upon the wider context of the book, the warning passage in Hebrews 10:26-31 indicates that those in danger had been “sanctified” (Hebrews 10:29), a term used earlier in the same chapter for positional sanctification made possible by Christ’s *once and for all* sacrifice (Hebrews 10:14; cf. 2:11).⁴⁰ Fourth,

39 See Grudem (167-168) where twice he translates Heb. 3:14 as “we share in Christ.”

40 Grudem is aware of the reference to being sanctified in Hebrews 10:29, but he tries to build a case for what he calls a “nonsaving sense of *hagiazō*” (ἁγιάζω) in light of the general context of 9:1–10:39 and particularly the usage in Hebrews 9:13 (see Grudem, 177-79). He states, “In such a context, it is appropriate to

the author—in a brilliant articulation of biblical examples of faith in Hebrews 11—does not suggest that the readers needed “saving faith” but rather perseverance in their faith.

Other Reformed theologians holding to the Means of Salvation view of this passage also disagree with Grudem’s interpretation. For example, Millard Erickson, a moderate Calvinist, confesses, “The vividness of the description, and particularly the statement ‘who have shared in the Holy Spirit,’ argues forcefully against denying that the people in view are (at least for a time) regenerate.”⁴¹

The Impossibility of Renewal to a Repentant State (6:6)

The final participle of the series indicates that it is possible that one who had truly been enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift (i.e., a truly

understand ‘profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was *sanctified*’ to mean ‘by which he was given the privilege of coming before God with the congregation of God’s people’ (178). Yet this is clearly not the point, because in all other cases in Hebrews where Jesus (or Jesus’ blood) is connected with *sanctification* (Heb. 2:11 twice; 10:10, 14, 29; and 13:12), it is always used in a soteriological sense. The usage in the immediate preceding context makes this clear: “For by one offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (10:14). This same observation would apply to those who might wish to translate Hebrews 10:29, “the blood of the covenant by which *it* (i.e., the covenant) was sanctified.” The context of Hebrews 10 clearly has in view people who are sanctified, not the covenant.

41 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1004. The majority of early church fathers who commented on Hebrews 6:4–6 understood the persons in view to be believers, as did Luther at the time of the Reformation. Calvin, however, laid the foundation for the non-Christian view that many in the Reformed tradition came to embrace. John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion 1*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1:555. The non-Christian view was subsequently reinforced by John Owen, as David Allen explains: “Shortly afterward, John Owen made a distinction between inward, genuine repentance and outward, false repentance. He viewed the group described in Heb 6:4–6 in the latter category. Since Owen, the vast majority of Reformed commentators have argued the common theme that Heb 6:4–6 describes only apparent believers who are, in fact, not Christians” (Allen, *Hebrews*, 357).

regenerate person) can “fall away” (παραπεσόντας—from the verb παραπίπτω). Our understanding of this crucial term is handicapped by the fact that this is the only time this word is used in the New Testament.⁴² Nevertheless, we are not completely empty-handed, for the verb is used eight times in the LXX.⁴³ It is used to translate several different Hebrew words (most often מַעַל, “to act unfaithfully, treacherously”). Frequently, παραπίπτω and its cognate forms have the meaning of “transgressing” against the Lord, though not in the sense of apostasy. In Ezekiel 20:27, for instance, the LXX (using the cognate noun παράπτωμα) reads “your fathers provoked me in their trespasses in which they transgressed (παραπτώμασιν) against me.” In the preceding context, the main issues to their “transgressing” were the profaning of the Sabbath and turning to idolatry, acts of rebellion against the Lord. Josephus used παραπίπτω in the sense of “acting treacherously” or “transgressing against” (but not against the Lord).⁴⁴ From Moulton and Milligan, we find a few other examples shortly after the first century AD, including the following phrase: “if the terms of it

42 Although the verb παραπίπτω only occurs once in the New Testament, the nominal form παράπτωμα occurs 19x, but always in the general sense of “sin” or “transgressions” (e.g., Col. 2:13), never as “apostasy.” The verb παραπίπτω does occur a number of times in ancient Greek literature. *LSJ* (Liddell, Scott and Jones, *A Greek English Lexicon*, 1321) indicates the primary meaning is “to fall beside,” but their category IV would be the most appropriate for Hebrews 6:6, namely, “to go astray, err” or “fall aside or away from.” So the verb and its cognate terms do not have a particular technical meaning. This has to be determined by context.

43 For παραπίπτω in the LXX, see Est. 6:10; Ezek. 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4; Wisdom of Solomon 6:9; 12:2.

44 For Josephus, see *Ant.*, 13.362; 16.200; and 19.285. In the latter reference, the Roman Emperor Claudius wrote, “I will, therefore, that the nation of the Jews be not deprived of (παραπεπτωκέναι) their rights and privileges, on account of the madness of Caius.” The idea would be that of acting treacherously against the Jews so as to deprive them of their rights. Similarly Philo, *On the Life of Moses*, I.142; and *Embassy* 120 and 201 (with the implication of “attacking”).

(i.e., a contract) should be broken (παραπεσιν) or it in any other way be rendered invalid.”⁴⁵

A better clue of the author’s intention, however, may be found in his use of the cognate form πίπτω (fall) earlier in the book. In Hebrews 4:11, he had warned the readers, “Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall (πέσῃ—aorist subjunctive of πίπτω) through following the same example of disobedience” (see 3:17). In our author’s thinking, one could “fall” rather than being diligent to enter God’s rest. There is also a strong connection to his warning of “falling away from the living God” in Hebrews 3:12. In the case of Hebrews 3:12, the verb is ἀφίστημι rather than παραπίπτω, but the two verbs are still related.⁴⁶ As mentioned above, most of the instances of παραπίπτω in the LXX translate the Hebrew verb נָפַל, but the same Hebrew word is rendered by ἀφίστημι in another verse (namely, 2 Chron. 26:18). Though the expression “falling away” in Hebrews 3:12 is not lexically related to our verb παραπίπτω, conceptually it is. Lane concurs that it is “equivalent

45 B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt, eds., *Oxyrhynchus Papyri I*, 9534 (AD 129), 1898; quoted in James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 488–89. The point is that the terms of the contract were *transgressed*.

46 In commenting on ἀφίστημι in Hebrews 3:12, Fanning is a bit presumptive when he states, “The verb used in Hebrews 3:12 for ‘turning away’ and its cognate noun frequently denote a willful rejection of salvation and rebellion against God and his ways, and the warning passages in Hebrews lend support for this strong meaning (apostasy)” (“A Classical Reformed View,” 181). Lexically, “rebellion” is at the heart of its meaning, but to claim it means a “willful rejection of salvation” exceeds the evidence. The word ἀφίστημι is used 14x in the New Testament, usually in the sense to “leave, depart from, draw away from,” and typically in a physical sense (physical departure). For spiritual departure or falling away, see 1 Timothy 4:1. It is far more common in the LXX, where it is used 230x. There, it not only has the sense of physical departure but of *rebellion against another* (e.g., Gen. 14:4). In Joshua 22:18, it is used of the Israelites potentially rebelling against the Lord. Jeroboam *rebelled* against Solomon (2 Chron. 13:6; see also Ezek. 17:15; 20:8). Edom revolted against the rule of Judah (2 Chron. 21:8, 10). It has the sense of *going off into unfaithfulness* in regard to the Lord (2 Chron. 29:6). What we can safely conclude is that ἀφίστημι in Hebrews 3:12 (“to fall away from the living God”) means to rebel against him, to turn away unfaithfully.

to the expression ἀποστήναι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ζῶντος, ‘to fall away from the living God,’ in 3:12.”⁴⁷

We can thus conclude that “falling away” in Hebrews 6:6 is to transgress (or act treacherously) against the Lord in a way that parallels what happened at Kadesh-barnea when the Hebrews rebelled against the Lord with a heart of unbelief, the end result of becoming hardened in heart against the Lord.⁴⁸ More specifically, this would mean (in the context of what the author has stated thus far in the epistle) to not hold fast one’s confession of faith in Christ—the very thing he had exhorted them to do in Hebrews 4:14 (see 3:6). This is a major concern of the author, for he reasserts this in Hebrews 10:23.

Of course, any drastic falling away from the faith was unlikely to happen without some prior development. They must be equally concerned about the root cause. Already, there was a passive drifting away from the word of Christ (2:1), they were sluggish hearers who had not moved on to maturity (5:11–14), and some were already avoiding Christian fellowship (10:25). Such a situation, if not soon corrected, would only bring on more hardening of heart until (like the Hebrews that fell in the wilderness) it would be too late. That is to say, God’s judgment would fall . . . it would not be averted.

The author is telling them that there is a point beyond which it is impossible to restore them to a state of repentance. This would presume that their hearts would be gravely hardened. At this point (and only God knows when one has reached such a point), the guilty one does not recover to a repentant state, for this would be tantamount to crucifying the Savior and a severe public humiliation of him.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Lane, 1:142.

⁴⁸ There is no justification for arguing that the reference to “hardening of heart” in Hebrews 3:8—and alluded to in 3:12–13—is evidence that such a one is an “unsaved” individual. This is drawn from the warning in Psalm 95:8 (“do not harden your hearts”), but the preceding verse (Psalm 95:7) indicates that it is *God’s people* that are being warned: “For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.” Hardening of heart can happen to a true child of God, as it did with Jesus’ disciples (see Mark 6:51–52; 16:14).

⁴⁹ Regarding the verb ἀνασταυροῦντας, there is no need to translate it “again crucify” (so NASB), as there is no practical difference between ἀνασταυρώω

Instead, the guilty one remains hardened against God and must face God's judgment. However, we must be careful what we conclude as to the form this judgment will take (and when it will take place).

By mentioning repentance (μετάνοιαν), the author is not suggesting they were never "saved." The author had just spoken a few verses prior to this of their repentance (μετανοίας) from dead works and of faith toward God (Hebrews 6:1). Obviously the author considered their repentance to have been "genuine," because—wishing to leave behind the foundational truths—he beckoned them on to maturity. At one point they had repented, but if they harden their hearts until at last "falling away"—an outright rebellion against the Lord—they would cut themselves off from being able to return to a state of repentance. The words "to again renew them to repentance" (πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν) must carefully be noticed. The repentance the author has in mind is a repentance they had previously attained to. There is no need to assert (as Grudem does) that those being warned may have had some sort of deficient repentance (as though they had never *truly* repented). He states,

it is possible to have a kind of repentance that falls short of saving repentance, a repentance that is not accompanied by saving faith. . . . We conclude that "repentance" means a sorrow for

and σταυρώ. For ἀνασταυρώ with the simple meaning "crucify" or "hang on a cross," see Josephus, Ant. 6.374; 11.17. Most translations put the causal conjunction "since" or "because" initiating the final clause ("since they crucify to themselves . . ."). In the Greek text there is no explicit conjunction, and this must be understood in light of the anarthrous participle. Technically, this could be translated "since" or "while," and some have opted for the latter temporal nuance, i.e., they cannot be restored to repentance *while* they continue in this state (which leaves open the possibility that this is not irreversible). However, the causal alternative is undoubtedly correct, because the whole point is that going on to maturity may be impossible in certain cases. Otherwise, there would be no need to make the statement about this, as F. F. Bruce has pointed out: "To say that they cannot be brought to repentance so long as they persist in their renunciation of Christ would be a truism hardly worth putting into words" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., 149).

actions that have been done or for sins that have been committed, and a resolve to forsake those sins.⁵⁰

Though Grudem may be unsure if those warned have had “genuine saving repentance,” the author of Hebrews does not suggest this at all.⁵¹ God, in his judgment of their rebellion, may cut off the opportunity to be restored to a state of repentance, and hence they would never mature.⁵²

An Illustration of the Two Main Alternatives (6:7-8)

The illustration that follows in Hebrews 6:7-8 has a great bearing on the interpretation of the warning itself, and hence this must be carefully taken into consideration.

1. Orientation. The author realizes that his audience could gravitate in one of two directions: they could either move on to maturity (6:1), or they could continue on the slippery slope that could ultimately lead

50 Grudem, *Perseverance* 149. In the context of Hebrews 6:1-6, however, the repentance mentioned in v. 6 most certainly refers back to the repentance in v. 1. Elsewhere Grudem argues that the repentance in Hebrews 6:1 was a genuine repentance that brought them salvation (*“Free Grace” Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2016], 41, 69).

The dispute with Grudem about repentance is not whether the Scriptures teach that non-Christians should repent (that is true in light of Luke 24:47; Acts 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; and 26:20). Rather the issue is what is meant by and what is entailed in the act of *saving repentance*. Grudem’s definition exceeds the biblical evidence.

51 Grudem’s uncertainty is evident when he states (150), “But none of this implies that the original repentance had necessarily led to saving faith and a forgiveness of sins. That is not specified, and we cannot therefore draw a conclusion on the basis of the term *repentance* itself.”

52 Contrast Grudem’s insistence that “salvation” is the issue rather than going on to maturity: “He wants to warn them that, although they have participated in the fellowship of the church and experienced a number of God’s blessings in their lives, yet if they fall away after all that, they will not be saved” (154). This directly contradicts the author’s point in Hebrews 6:3 that it is maturity that God might not permit.

them to an outright rebellion of “falling away” (6:6). Though, in reality, different ones among them were at different points of this spectrum, the author is primarily concerned with the direction they are headed. One leads to God’s blessing, while the other may result in disaster. To help them see his concern, the author uses an illustration from agriculture involving the response of the ground to the care that it receives.

To understand the illustration, we should carefully note two important observations: (1) it is not “two grounds” being described but two possible outcomes of the same ground, and (2) regardless of the outcome, the ground has received the rain and what it needs for growth. Regarding the first point, we should notice that the NIV has obscured this matter:

⁷**Land that drinks** in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. ⁸**But land that produces** thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned

In the Greek text, the word *ground* (γῆ) occurs only once (namely, in v. 7 . . . not twice as the NIV implies). So the point is that the *same ground* can have two possible outcomes, and by analogy there can be two possible outcomes for the “sluggish” readers to whom the author writes.

The falling of the rain upon the ground probably speaks of God’s divine care and provision for the ground, i.e., God gives what is needed for growth. In this illustration, the ground should never be devoid of vegetation, because it is watered and sustained. This is what God does for the life of each believer. He waters and cares for him so that there will be fruitfulness. If fruitfulness does not result, it is not because God has not given his care and done his part.

2. Possible Interpretative Options. The illustration of vv. 7–8 could be interpreted in one of three ways:

1. A contrast between a true believer and an unbeliever
2. A contrast between a faithful enduring Christian and an “apostate Christian” who loses his salvation

3. A contrast between a faithful believer who is fruitful and an unfaithful believer [but not involving loss of salvation]

The decision about the correct interpretation should not be based upon one's preconceived theology *as primary resort* but first and foremost upon the exegetical details of 6:7–8 and the general context.

In regard to context, nothing explicitly has been said about loss of salvation, and the details of 6:4–6 do not seem directed at unbelievers (notwithstanding the fact that several commentators have opted for this suggestion). Context is more in favor of option three above, especially since mature and immature believers have been in view since 5:11.

3. *Exegetical Details of Hebrews 6:7–8.* Most of the concern is with v. 8, so attention will primarily be given to this.

a. An allusion to Genesis 3:17–18. The author of Hebrews is not simply making an illustration, but words his illustration in such a way as to allude to Genesis 3:17–18.

Hebrews 6:8 - ἐκφέρουσα δὲ ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους, ἀδόκιμος καὶ κατάρας ἐγγύς

NASB	LXX
Cursed is the ground	ἐπικατάρατος ἡ γῆ
because of you;	ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις σου
In toil you shall eat of it	ἐν λύπαις φάγη αὐτήν
All the days of your life.	πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς σου
Both thorns and thistles	ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους
it shall grow for you,	ἀνατελεῖ σοι

Not only do we have the exact words for *thorns and thistles* (ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους), but the noun *curse* (κατάρας) in Hebrews 6:8 has similarity to the adjective *cursed* (ἐπικατάρατος) in the LXX of Genesis 3:17.⁵³

⁵³ Note that Galatians 3:10 closely links the adjective ἐπικατάρατος with the noun κατάρα.

In the context of Genesis 3:17–18, the first man Adam received God’s *curse* for disobedience. This is reflected in the words “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground (γῆ).” Hence, the allusion to Genesis 3:17–18 (despite the fact that the order in Hebrews is inverted) brings to our mind the *temporal judgment* that fell on the first man’s disobedience.⁵⁴

b. Blessing-curse motif. Given the Jewish nature of the audience, the words *blessing* and *curse* would no doubt have particular significance to them in light of their Old Testament orientation. These words were juxtaposed in Deuteronomy 28–30, in which *blessing* was promised for obedience and *curse* (i.e., discipline) was promised for disobedience. Notice the use of the same word κατάρα in Deuteronomy 28:15, 45; 29:26; 30:1, 19. The word *curse* should not be taken as a technical term in Hebrews 6:8 for those who are unregenerate. From an Old Testament perspective, this designated God’s discipline on his own children who were disobedient.

c. “If it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless. . . .” The Greek adjective for *worthless* (ἄδοκιμος) is certainly not a technical term for unbelievers. The word means “‘not standing the test’ then *unqualified, worthless, base*.”⁵⁵ The particular nuance of the word, of course, depends on the context in which it is being used. In the LXX, δοκιμάζω and its cognate terms were often used in relation to testing or examining metals (especially by fire) to determine the acceptability of their quality (e.g., Proverbs 8:10; 17:3; 25:4; Isaiah 1:22). If they did not meet the standard, they were considered unfit and hence disapproved. The apostle Paul could use the term in relation to himself, as he does in 1 Corinthians 9:27, “lest . . . I myself should be disqualified.” In this case, his eternal salvation was not the concern. Possibly, he thought about disqualification or disapproval. Lowery suggests that Paul was concerned that he might be disapproved by God and

54 There may also be similarity to the *song of the vineyard* in Isaiah 5. In that passage, ἄκανθα is used 3 times (5:2, 4, 6). God’s discipline came upon it, because it did not produce good grapes.

55 BDAG, 3rd ed., 21.

thus face the disciplinary action of God that could even cut short his life.⁵⁶

On the other hand, the preceding context (with its analogy of competition in the athletic games) might suggest that Paul was fearful of jeopardizing his eternal reward. Fee agrees that the athletic metaphor is still in view. He writes, "This has been the point of the metaphors from the beginning, that the Corinthians exercise self-control lest they fail to obtain the eschatological prize."⁵⁷

The antonym to our term for *worthless* is δόκιμος, a word that emphasizes a *favorable evaluation*. In 2 Corinthians 10:18, for instance, it is used to indicate the approval of that Christian (but not every Christian!) that is commended by the Lord. Some Christians are "approved" and some are not (see 1 Corinthians 11:19). The Lord's approval may stem from the way one handles the Word of God (2 Timothy 2:15) or by the way one successfully endures divine trials in his life (James 1:12). Thus, the evaluation of the unfruitful ground of Hebrews 6:8 as being ἀδόκιμος probably implies no more than the fact that the offender is considered unfit and has not gained God's approval. He may be in store for God's discipline and eventual loss of reward, but there is nothing from a study of ἀδόκιμος or δόκιμος in the New Testament to establish that he loses his salvation, much less that he was never saved to begin with.

d. "Whose end (is) for burning" (ἥς τὸ τέλος εἰς καῦσιν). The "end" or outcome (τέλος) of the ground if it yields thorns and thistles is burning. Is the author trying to suggest (by analogy) that the individuals that "fall away" (6:6) are destined for hell? If so, then those who are in danger are either (1) Christians who lose their salvation, or (2) professing Christians who in actuality were never regenerate.⁵⁸

56 David K. Lowery, "1 Corinthians," *Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 525. Note that chapter 10 immediately launches into a discussion about God's discipline upon Israelites of old.

57 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 440.

58 Grudem, failing to observe the allusion to Genesis 3:17-18 and the broader usage of fire as a metaphor in Scripture, *simply assumes* that "these

The Greek noun for *burning* (καῦσις) is used only once in the New Testament [see the mention of fire as a judgment in Hebrews 10:27], but it occurs seven times in the LXX. In Isaiah 4:4, it is used of God's judgment and purging of the land (including Jerusalem) for the millennium "by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning." In Daniel 7:11, it is used of the destruction of the little horn (the Antichrist) who is "given to the burning fire." The latter certainly has *hell* in mind (compare Revelation 19:20), though the word itself does not have to mean this.

Basically, *fire* is often used in Scripture to speak of God's judgment or sometimes of purifying something or someone. Though *fire* can be used to speak of the ultimate judgment of the unregenerate in hell, *fire* is also used to speak of God's judgment in connection with regenerate Christians. The latter is clearly the case in 1 Corinthians 3:12–15 where Paul is concerned about the "works" of believers in regard to God's church:

¹²Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with

consequences (being cursed and burned) are a picture of final judgment from God" (155). He goes on to say (156), "this bad fruit in a similar way revealed what their true status was all along: they had never truly been saved in the first place." The only rationale he offers for this conclusion is based on the present participles in vv. 7-8 (τίκτουσα and ἐκφέρουσα), which he thinks should be translated "*continuing to bear*" vegetation and "*continuing to produce*" thorns and thistles. Yet his insistence on the *continuous* nuance of these participles (as though the continuance of producing thorns and thistles is evidence of their being unsaved) is overstressing the force of the present participle, used here as a simple adjectival participle. [See D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, on "Aspect," 615-616]. The present participle is not emphasizing the durative nature of the verb but simply making a *statement of fact* (one bore useful vegetation and the other did not). That this is the case can be substantiated by comparison with the present participles in Hebrews 6:6 (ἀνασταυρῶντας and παραδειγματίζοντας). In that case, the author is not trying to point out that the sinner was "*continuing to crucify*" Christ and "*continuing to humiliate*" him, but simply that he was guilty of doing this by "falling away." Continual action was not the point.

fire; and the fire itself will test **the quality of each man's work**.

¹⁴If any man's **work** which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. ¹⁵If any man's **work** is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

In the case of this passage, fire is used for revealing the *quality* of the believer's works. The purpose is for assessing whether or not these are *rewardable good works*, but the person's eternal destiny is not the issue.

Hence, the motifs of *fire* and *burning* can speak of judgment in regard to the unregenerate (i.e., hades/hell) as well as evaluation of the regenerate (i.e., examination of one's works for the purpose of giving rewards). In the case of the latter, works that are unsuitable for reward are burned up.

So we must ask if in the case of Hebrews 6:8, the author is using *fire* to speak of the ultimate destiny of individuals in hell for their failure to put their faith in Christ, or if he is concerned about their *works* (i.e., a worthless life without rewardable good works). Two things in the following context argue for the latter: (1) he mentions their *work* in Hebrews 6:10; and (2) rewards are in view in Hebrews 6:12 when he speaks of those who *inherit the promises* because of their faith and patience.

Based on these two contextual observations as well as the other matters mentioned in points a-c above, the danger of *fire* is not related to hell. This probably looks at the discipline and judgment that can come upon an unfaithful Christian's life who has not brought forth fruit (as he should) but rather a life of worthless works (thorns and thistles). Such a person stands in jeopardy of receiving the Lord's discipline in this life ("near curse") and will certainly see his works burned up when examined at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Romans 14:10–12; 1 Corinthians 3:10ff.; see also 2 Corinthians 5:9–10). In contrast, the believer that is moving onward to "maturity" and walking in obedience to the Lord can expect to receive God's "blessing."

Encouragement And Hope For The Readers (6:9-12)

Despite the rebuke for being "dull of hearing" as spiritual babes and despite the ominous warning given in 6:4–6, the author has better

hopes for his readers. It may be possible for these wayward believers to “fall away,” but the author apparently does not think they have yet gone to that extreme. So, his warning of the fatal consequences is balanced by an encouraging note and exhortation to faithfulness in vv. 9–12.

An Affirmation of His Confidence in the Readers (6:9)

In the previous illustration, the unsuitable vegetation was burned off the unfruitful ground. That should not be seen as the normative outcome of the Christian life, and the author is concerned of “better things” for them, i.e., things that “accompany salvation.” Most likely, *salvation* (σωτηρία) is being used in the same eschatological sense that it previously had in the book (see 1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9) and in which it will be used in regard to the second coming in 9:28. Earlier in the epistle, the author anticipated Christ becoming heir of all things (1:2) and of those who would “inherit salvation” (1:14). In chapter two, the author connects this concept of *inheriting salvation* with the regaining of God’s plan for man exercising dominion. This is the time when man shall be crowned with glory and honor . . . in the resurrected state ruling jointly with Christ. This is the glorious destiny of believers who are faithful to Christ in this life (see Revelation 2:26–27). These are the “better things” that the author has in mind for his readers. Faithfulness does bring a rich reward, both now and in the eschatological future.

Grudem, on the other hand, interprets the “better things” as meaning better characteristics of saving faith than were mentioned in Hebrews 6:4–5 (being enlightened, having tasted, made partakers of the Holy Spirit, etc.) rather than that which is depicted as burning up in v. 8. Since he regards the participles in Hebrews 6:4–5 as descriptives of non-Christians who stopped short of genuine salvation, the “better things” for him are the things mentioned in Hebrews 6:10, namely, their work, love, and service to fellow saints. He writes,

Since things like love and service and faith in verses 10–12 are the kinds of good fruit that do give evidence of salvation, it is reasonable to think that the author would say that these are “better” than the enlightening, tasting, and partaking in verses 4–6, which in themselves do not give evidence of salvation. . . . This

implies that the blessings in verses 4-6 were not things that belong to salvation.⁵⁹

In defense of his interpretation, Grudem claims that “the adjective *kreisson*, ‘better,’ in Hebrews is regularly used to contrast something better with something good (better covenant, better promises, better sacrifices, . . .), not something better with something bad.”⁶⁰ While that statement by itself is correct, *BDAG* lexicon indicates that *κρείσσω* can be used in one of two ways, either (1) “pert. to being of high status, *more prominent, higher in rank, preferable, better;*” or (2) “pert. to having a relative advantage in value,” adjectively “*more useful, more advantageous, better.*”⁶¹ *BDAG*, however, put the verses mentioned by Grudem in category one but puts Hebrews 6:9 in category two. The word *κρείσσω* is used in the sense of “better” versus “bad” (*BDAG*’s category two) in 1 Corinthians 7:9; 11:17; and 2 Peter 2:21. For example, “But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse” (1 Corinthians 11:17).

A second argument used by Grudem for “better things” is that (according to him) the author in Hebrews 6:9 would have used the singular *κρείττον τι* (as in Hebrews 11:40) rather than the plural *κρείσσονα*, if he had meant “something better than *judgment*.”⁶² This is an invalid point, as the author uses the plural *κρείσσω* in Hebrews 6:9 because he is contrasting the plural nouns “thorns and thistles” (*ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους*) in Hebrews 6:8 with the promises of God they are destined to inherit (Hebrews 6:12) as a result of their “work” and “love” (Hebrews 6:10).

A third argument by Grudem that the “better things” are their *present* evidences of saving faith is that the present participle *ἐχόμενα* (“that accompany”) in the phrase *καὶ ἐχόμενα σωτηρίας* (“that

⁵⁹ Grudem, 159.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁶¹ *BDAG*, 3rd ed., 566.

⁶² Grudem, *Perseverance*, 158. The author of Hebrews does not use the word “judgment;” that is Grudem’s choice of words (presumably for the “burning” mentioned in v. 8).

accompany salvation”) “is most naturally understood as giving a sense of present duration over time, ‘things *now presently* belonging to salvation, and continuing to belong to salvation.” Yet this is based on a misunderstanding of the simple adjectival participle, which simply reports the fact of the action, not the duration of the action.⁶³ It is not the “present moment” that is in view, and this is confirmed by the use of salvation (σωτηρία) elsewhere in Hebrews as a future experience (see esp. Hebrews 1:14 and 9:28).⁶⁴

The Reason for His Confidence in Them (6:10)

The conjunction *For* (γὰρ) in v. 10 signals the reason (illative use of γὰρ) for his confidence in his readers. Apparently, the author had firsthand knowledge of this group of believers, and he knew that they had been faithful to the Lord in days past. Notice that his commendation is not in regard to their personal justification, but in regard to their faithfulness *as Christians*. Their faithfulness is evidenced by their *work* (ἔργου) and their love. Later in the book (10:32ff.), he commends their past faithfulness again. Since they had begun their Christian pilgrimage well, they must not turn from the pathway of faithfulness.

The Exhortation to Remain Faithful (6:11–12)

They are to be diligent in having the “full assurance of hope” until the end. The word *diligence* translates the Greek σπουδή, a cognate term to the verb σπουδάζω in Hebrews 4:11 (“Let us be diligent to enter that rest”). The word means “eagerness, earnestness, diligence, willingness,

63 See comments under point 3d above where Grudem had made a similar mistake of Greek syntax. Note also that the article τὰ in the phrase τὰ κρείσσονα καὶ ἐχόμενα σωτηρίας does double duty (for both κρείσσονα and ἐχόμενα), and hence this is an adjectival participle.

64 Part of Grudem’s misinterpretation is based on his misunderstanding of the “salvation” mentioned in Hebrews 6:9. It is not salvation from the penalty of sins that is in view, but the believer’s future experience of salvation in conjunction with Christ’s second coming (just as their “inheriting the promises” is contingent on persevering “until the end” [v 11]).

zeal.”⁶⁵ They are to be diligent and eagerly make every effort to maintain a “full assurance of hope” until the end. The author has in mind the same concern as in 3:6—“if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end” (see 3:14; 10:23).⁶⁶ He is concerned that *each one of them* (ἐκαστον ὑμῶν) maintains his confession of Jesus as Messiah and is diligent to remain faithful to him.

⁶⁵ BDAG, 3rd ed., 939.

⁶⁶ The repetition of the verb “hold fast” (κατέχω) in the conditional statements found in Hebrews 3:6 and 3:14, suggests that the author has the same concern in both verses. The one who “holds fast” is the one who is said to be his “house” (οἶκος) in 3:12 and who has become one of “the μέτοχοι of Christ” in 3:14. How these expressions are translated and interpreted is crucial. In the first case (being his “house”), the metaphor must be understood in light of the preceding context. Based on the statement in Numbers 12:6-8, God said that Moses was faithful in all his “house” (LXX, ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ οἴκῳ μου πιστός ἐστιν). Note that “house” (οἶκος) in Numbers 12:7 is not being used in regard to the physical structure of the tabernacle, but of those who function within it (i.e., the *household* of worshipers). [Faithfulness has no meaning for the physical structure]. Moses was faithful as a member of the worshiping community (God’s “house”). Of greater significance than the worshiping community in the wilderness, however, is the worshiping community (the “house/household”) of Jesus. To equate Jesus’ “house” with the body of Christ (which the Reformed view does) misses the point. The issue, in the case of Jesus’ “house” is whether or not those who are *saved holy brethren* (Hebrews 3:1; see fn.12) are going to be faithful believer-priests in the worshiping community of which Jesus has the role of High Priest (see Hebrews 10:21; and compare 12:28 and 13:15-16).

In regard to the conditional statement in Hebrews 3:14, rather than translating μέτοχοι τοῦ Χριστοῦ as “partakers of Christ” (as though spiritual union with Christ was in view), I posit that we should translate the phrase “partners with Christ,” in the sense that we are *partnering* with him in a common endeavor (see comments on μέτοχοι at discussion of Hebrews 6:4 above). The justification for this interpretation is simply the following verse and the danger for brethren of “hardening one’s heart” (see fn. 48 for a defense of the notion that “hardening” is a danger for *genuine Christians*). We are to “partner with Christ” in the sense of drawing near to him for the sustaining grace needed to arrive victoriously at the destination of our eschatological salvation (Heb. 4:16; 7:25). In doing so, we will not fall short of God’s *greater rest* (see fn. 10 above).

Not only must they be careful to hold fast their confession, but the author does not even want them to be *sluggish* (νωθροί). This is the same word he used to describe them in 5:11 when he charged them as being “dull of hearing” (νωθροὶ ταῖς ἀκοαῖς). Unfortunately, the NIV obscures the connection by its translation—“we do not want you to become lazy.”⁶⁷ Indeed, they are *sluggish* at the present moment, but they must not remain so.

Alternatively, they can be “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” *Inheriting the promises* is not automatic for any Christian, for this is based on the exercise of faith and patience. The verbal idea of “inheriting” is found four times in Hebrews, namely 1:4; 1:14; 6:12; and 12:17.⁶⁸ In the context of Hebrews, the *inheritance* in view is the “eschatological salvation” and full participation in the kingdom of Jesus Christ, entering God’s rest and ruling jointly with Christ. Disobedience and unbelief may jeopardize these future promises (see Hebrews 3:12, 19; 4:1, 3, 11), but faith and patience help to bring them about.

Conclusion

From the preceding study, we have observed that the *inclusio* involving the word νωθρός in 5:11 and 6:12 marks the true parameters of the immediate context. This is an important observation, since it helps identify the readers addressed in 5:11–14 as being the same as those in 6:4–8. In both cases they are true Christians, and this is confirmed by the descriptive participles in 6:4–5. Their need is to press on to maturity, but a “falling away” (6:6) could eliminate that possibility for them. For committing such a sin, God would not permit them to move on in maturing.

The exact nature of the “falling away” (παραπίπτω, a New Testament hapax legomenon) in Hebrews 6:6 cannot be established by lexical

67 The verb γίνομαι can mean either “be” or “become.” Note that the NASB chose the translation “be,” which is better in light of the use of νωθρός in 5:11. The NIV’s “become lazy” suggests they had not already entered into this state.

68 In addition, the noun κληρονομία (“inheritance”) occurs in Hebrews 9:15 and 11:8.

definition alone, as LXX and extra-biblical usage simply identifies this as a general act of “transgressing, acting treacherously, or a breaking of agreement” (violating the understood expectations). Since “falling away” (παράπιπτο) in Hebrews 6:6 is not a technical term, the meaning of the term must be established on other considerations. First, there is the use in Hebrews 4:11 of the cognate term πίπτω, translated “fall.” One might “fall through following the same example of disobedience” as did the wilderness generation. For them, this came as a result of their refusal to enter the Promised Land. Second, there is the use of a *conceptually similar* term in Hebrews 3:12, namely ἀφίστημι (“fall away”), since both παράπιπτο and ἀφίστημι are in some cases translated by the same Hebrew verb נָפַל in the OT. This suggests that παράπιπτο is similar to “falling away from the living God” mentioned in Hebrews 3:12, i.e., an act of rebellion stemming from a progressive hardening of heart against God akin to what happened at Kadesh-barnea.

David Allen, though affirming the Loss of Rewards view, denies that this transgression is a willful rejection of Christ (apostasy) but rather a “falling into a permanent state of immaturity through a willful ‘once for all’ (*hapax*) refusal to trust God to deliver them from their present troubles.”⁶⁹ His conclusion, however, fails to account for other significant statements in the book that would indicate that far more than a refusal to trust God must be involved. In particular these include the exhortations to “hold fast” (κατέχω) their confidence (Heb. 3:6), the beginning of their assurance (3:14), and the confession of their hope (10:23). Added to this are the exhortations to hold fast (κρατέω) their confession (4:14) and the hope set before them (6:18). Hence, they must not throw away their “confidence” in the blood of Christ that has been brought into the true holy place (10:19, 35). In light of (1) these exhortations, (2) the identity of the audience as Jewish Christians who were suffering for their faith (10:32-34), (3) the acknowledgment that some among them had already forsaken their assembling together (10:25), and (4) the closing warning against false teachings and the call to obey their leaders (13:9-11, 17), the transgression involved in “falling

69 Allen, 381. Elsewhere (390) he claims, “It is not apostasy that the author of Hebrews is warning against, but persistent rebelliousness comparable to the wilderness generation in the exodus.”

away” appears to be that of turning away from active participation in the community of messianic believers and retreating into some form of Judaism. We cannot say for sure that this would have meant an explicit public renunciation of their faith in Christ, but such a withdrawal from the Christian assembly and reaffirmation of the blood of the Levitical sacrificial system would at least be *tantamount* to a rejection of their faith (and thus a “trampling under foot of the Son of God” and “regarding as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified” (Heb. 10:29).

God, who sees the hearts of all mankind, would certainly know when one had gone too far, such that they can be said to have “fallen away.” This would not mean a loss of eternal life, however, and we do well to observe that such an outcome is never clearly specified. In Hebrews 6:7–8, the author’s deliberate allusion to Genesis 3:17–18 underscores that such rebels would forfeit God’s blessing and divine discipline would be in store for them. So—just as with the rebels at Kadesh-barnea—they can expect to face *temporal judgment*, perhaps even loss of life. [In this regard, the designation “Loss of Reward view” is a misnomer; temporal judgment is also involved]. Also, by the fact that they could no longer progress in maturing, their rebellion would result in loss of usefulness for God and the absence of good works for which they would be rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Hence, there would be significant loss of reward and, in the context of Hebrews, even the opportunity to reign with Christ in the coming messianic kingdom—the greater rest to come (Hebrews 4:11; 6:11–12; 10:35–36). In the words of Hebrews 10:38–39, by shrinking back in unbelief, not only would God take no pleasure in them, but they would bring upon themselves a life of destruction (i.e., a ruined, wasted life).

A careful exegesis of Hebrews 5:11–6:12 reveals that Grudem’s analysis of the passage and his defense of the Tests of Genuineness view (Reformed view) fails on multiple counts. The descriptive terms supplied in Hebrews 6:4–5 are indeed those of genuine Christians who are potentially in danger of “falling away.” The Loss of Reward view—in contrast to Reformed theology—does not guarantee that a genuine believer will necessarily go on to persevere in a life of faithfulness and good works. Based on this study, rebellion and failure are certainly possible. For this very reason, Schreiner and Caneday charge that

adherents of this view “radicalize eternal security by insisting that security in Jesus Christ guarantees that even those who fail to persevere in faithfulness to Christ and his gospel will never perish but are saved and will remain saved forever.”⁷⁰ Pastorally speaking, it is difficult to imagine that any Christian would “fall away” as described in Hebrews 6:4-6—given the wonderful grace and love that Jesus has for his own. However, we should be willing to admit that *hardening of one’s heart* is indeed possible for a Christian (Hebrews 3:12-13), and left unchecked this can certainly lead to serious spiritual deterioration and failure. This is what makes discipleship so imperative! Yet even in extreme cases of spiritual failure, the promise of eternal life is predominantly about the faithfulness of Jesus to his promises, not the faithfulness (or lack thereof) of those who believe him for it.

Fortunately, the author quickly turns in Hebrews 6:9 to encourage his readers that such negative warnings need not be their fate at all. Through faith and endurance, they can “inherit the promises.” Hebrews 5:11–6:12 is a good reminder to each of us that we should be pressing on to spiritual maturity, but this is not an automatic or guaranteed outcome for any Christian. One attains to maturity as he responds in faith and obedience to God’s Word, surrenders his life to the Savior, and endures in the pathway of discipleship. The price, of course, is high (death to self), but the rewards are great . . . and the rewards are for all eternity!

70 Schreiner and Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us*, 25.