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**A Response To I. Howard Marshall’s *Kept By The Power Of God: A Study Of Perseverance And Falling Away*—
Chapter Six: The Epistle To The Hebrews**

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Introduction

In its own right, I. Howard Marshall’s *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*² has most certainly earned

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its placed among the modern Christian classics of the likes of J. I. Packer's *Knowing God*. This is so, not only for the fact that it has had a very wide readership, but also because it has maintained its place as a formidable contribution to the Calvinist-Arminian debate over the perseverance of the saints³ for nearly a half a century. It is to be noted immediately that this book by a preeminent British Wesleyan scholar and “dean of evangelical New Testament scholars”⁴ is the fruit of the revision of his Aberdeen dissertation that was first published by Epworth Press, London, in 1969.⁵ Since its original publication, the book has gone through a number of editions, including an American [2nd] edition by Bethany House Publishers (1975), a third edition by Paternoster Press (1995), and a final digital/reprint edition with an epilogue, again by Paternoster Press (2005).⁶ Indeed, this last edition has given the book a “new lease of life,” since it has now made the list of the Biblical Classics Library of Paternoster Press (author's Preface to the Third Edition). Additionally, the book has received numerous reviews, both professional and popular, with an overwhelming reception at both levels.

But despite this widespread reception, not everyone has been entirely satisfied with Marshall's conclusions, and from time to time questions have been raised about his exegesis and conclusions. Of special concern for this contribution is Marshall's treatment of the

² Hereafter, this title will be referenced by the abbreviation *KBPG*.

³ What we refer to here as the “perseverance of the saints” is the particular concern of Marshall's work. But he regards this expression as a “forbidding title” of “dogmatic theology” that is somewhat reductionistic of the broader subject of the struggles of the Christian life. As Marshall puts it, “We may express it more simply as the study of the tension under which the Christian lives his life from his conversion until his entry to the heavenly kingdom” [*KBPG*, 22].

⁴ This title is from Douglas J. Moo's blurb endorsing Marshall's *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 2004). Accessed, 12/1/2014@<http://www.amazon.com/New-Testament-Theology-Witnesses-Gospel-ebook/dp/B0054I25QU>.

⁵ See “Epilogue: The Problem of Apostasy in the New Testament,” in *KBPG*, 259; also available in *Jesus the Savior: Studies in New Testament Theology* (London: SPCK, 1990), 306-24. In Marshall's own words, “The book was a shortened and somewhat simplified version of [his] thesis” (p. “Epilogue,” 259).

⁶ References to Marshall's work throughout this article will be limited to this final edition, unless otherwise indicated.

warning passages in the book of Hebrews, which passages have been well recognized as a problem for interpreters from the earliest times. An evaluation of Marshall's treatment of these warning passages is important, since probably no other passages in the entire Bible have lent themselves so convincingly to the support of Marshall's thesis [see below]. As Marshall suggests, "...the possibility of apostasy is depicted more radically [in Hebrews] than elsewhere in the New Testament" (*KBPG*, 157).

The purpose of this contribution, then, will be limited to an assessment of Marshall's treatment of these warning passages. Specifically, we will attempt to provide a response to chapter six of Marshall's *Kept by the Power of God* by way of an evaluation of his understanding of these warning passages in relation to his main concern about perseverance and falling away. Since this chapter on Hebrews forms part of Marshall's overall argument, the present evaluation undoubtedly has ramifications for his broader conclusions about perseverance and falling away in the Bible as a whole. So while the focus of this evaluation will be on Chapter Six: "The Epistle to the Hebrews," the conclusions reached here will no doubt reflect on the overall soundness of Marshall's thesis one way or another.

Following this introduction, this assessment will proceed along the lines of the following six points: (1) Justification for this response; (2) Appraisal of the Book; (3) Statement of Marshall's Thesis; (4) [Summary of] Marshall's Treatment of the Warning passages; (5) Critique of Marshall's Treatment of the Warning Passages; (6) Conclusion.

A. Justification for This Response

It may seem that this is a rather late attempt at such a response, since the book has already had a life of four and half decades, and even the last digitized edition is now nearly ten years old (2005). Moreover, one might be tempted to wonder if such a task as this is not unworthy of the enduring legacy that has now turned Marshall's work into a classic. Though the comparison is not entirely fair, imagine, for example, someone writing a critique of Augustine's *Confessions*, or even closer at hand, Packer's *Knowing God*. A further careful statement of our purpose, then, is necessary to justify this late attempt at a critique of Marshall's work.

First, there has not been a full scale response to Marshall's book as a whole since its first publication, and its influence continues to be felt. Second, our goal is to focus on Marshall's treatment of the warning passages, not only because they form a significant plank in his overall thesis,⁷ but also because they continue to feature prominently in the ongoing debate over perseverance and falling away. Third, Marshall's thesis, and particularly his treatment of the warning passages, has not been accepted wholesale as a consensus among Christians, and the divide among Christians along Calvinistic and Arminian lines, which this work seeks to redress [*KBPG*, 26], still exists. Indeed, it might be said that *KBPG* has not achieved its goal to temper the divide of which we speak, and in some respects may even have contributed to this longstanding impasse. This, of course, would be no fault of Marshall's, or even the failure of the book to convince. For what an author intends to achieve via his literary output is hardly to be equated with his readers' response.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is a rather modest one: it is to examine the thesis of Marshall's work by using one chapter—chapter six: “The Epistle to the Hebrews”—as a test case of the soundness of Marshall's thesis to the effect that a true believer may apostatize completely and forfeit his eternal salvation.

B. Appraisals of the Book

Before proceeding further, it is only fitting to acknowledge the overall warm reception of the book, as well as the tribute that has been paid to it since its arrival. To go no further, Clark H. Pinnock, who wrote the foreword to the second [American] edition, is only one among many on whose thinking “Dr. Marshall's arguments” have played “the decisive influence along these lines”⁸ (*KBPG*, 11). Pinnock went on to refer to the work “As a piece of meticulous exegesis, the fruits of which have wide theological implications...” (*Ibid.*). And again he states, “Dr. Marshall's case rests on solid exegetical foundations, and is not to be set aside on dogmatic or a

⁷ As Marshall himself notes, “An investigation of the teaching of Hebrews is consequently of great importance for our study” [*KBPG*, 137].

⁸ For Pinnock, “these lines” means the view that “the security of the believer is conditioned upon his faithfulness to Jesus Christ” (*KBPG*, 11).

priori grounds...Unless Dr. Marshall can be refuted exegetically, he cannot be refuted at all” (Ibid.).

Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday also praise Marshall’s work as “a careful study of the New Testament.”⁹ At the same time, they did not fail to point out weaknesses both in his arguments and exegesis.¹⁰ Likewise, Bruce A. Demarest sees Marshall’s work as a “painstaking exegesis of the Biblical texts that bear any relevance to the issue.”¹¹ But probably the most positive overall appraisal of Marshall’s book comes from none other than the internationally towering New Testament scholar, F. F. Bruce. The language is typical vintage Bruce: “This study by Howard Marshall will find appreciative readers among all who are concerned to know what Scripture teaches. Even such an incurable Calvinist as the reviewer counts it a sign of grace that the volume is entitled *Kept by the Power of God*.”¹² This says a lot for the significance of the book, which no serious consideration of the subject of perseverance and apostasy can ignore. Indeed, in some treatment of this subject, interaction with Marshall’s work is pervasive.¹³

That being said though, not everything about Marshall’s work has been judged so positively. For example, it is ironic that despite the positive appraisal of Marshall by Demarest, the substance of his review is negative.¹⁴ Also, whether or not one agrees with Schreiner and

⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 22.

¹⁰ Ibid., 63, 83.

¹¹ Bruce A. Demarest, review of *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*, by I. Howard Marshall, Minneapolis: Bethany Press, 1975; in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19/2 (June 1976): 144.

¹² I was not able to locate the review from which this comment was taken, but the words are found on the back cover of the Paternoster Digital Library edition of *KBPG*, 2005.

¹³ See, for example, Schreiner & Caneday, *Race Set Before Us*, passim. See also, Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away*, WUNT 37 (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1990), passim.

¹⁴ To be fair, Demarest’s review hardly does justice to the substance of Marshall’s work. It is rather sketchy and does not address the specifics of Marshall’s exegesis. Nonetheless, it is also fair to say that a work of just over two
[Footnote continued on next page ...]

Caneday's view on the nature and function of warnings, they have raised serious questions about Marshall's treatment of conditional statements in the New Testament.¹⁵ In addition, Michael Eaton may be justified to say that Marshall's exegesis of certain Pauline texts on foreknowledge, election, and predestination "pay little attention to the details of Paul's argument".¹⁶ Finally, on the question of the assurance of believers, D. A. Carson has assessed that "Marshall does not adequately handle the numerous passages and themes that do promise the security of the believer."¹⁷ The apparent effect of this is that "Despite Marshall's salutary emphasis on the promises of God, at the end of the day the security of the believer finally rests with the believer."¹⁸

hundred and fifty pages can hardly be regarded as "painstaking exegesis" of all texts in the Bible on the subject of perseverance and falling away.

¹⁵ They suggest, for example, that Marshall "admits that conditional statements, in themselves, do not imply doubt," but that "elsewhere he does derive doubt on the basis of conditional statements themselves (e.g., Mk 13:22)" (*Race Set Before Us*, 189; cf. 163). On this score, they opined that "This demonstrates how easy it is to impose one's theological bias on the text" (Ibid.). Schreiner and Caneday have raised many other concerns about Marshall's exegesis (see Ibid., 32, 159, 180, 189, 220-22, 228, 232, 249, 255, 260, 262-64, 314).

¹⁶ Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 250, f.n. #4. Indeed, Eaton suggests that Marshall is among "Arminian interpreters" who are "lamentably weak" on dealing with such texts. But such a comment is quite unworthy of Marshall. Nonetheless, it would be fair to say that Marshall's discussion of God's "foreknowledge," which depends entirely on F. J. Leenhardt (*Epistle to the Romans*, ET, London: Lutterworth, 1961), 233, is rather sketchy (see, *KBPG*, 102).

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, "Reflection on Assurance," in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, 247-76 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 268. This critique by Carson is particularly relevant to our discussion here, since Marshall's treatment of the warnings in Hebrews concerns the very "problem" posed by this apparent conflict between the warnings against possible apostasy in Hebrews and other passages in the New Testament that "emphasize more the eternal security of the believer" (see *KBPG*, 137).

¹⁸ Ibid. One can hardly fault Carson for arriving at this conclusion, for even if Marshall protests to the contrary, the overall impression one gets throughout the book is that Christian assurance hangs thinly on the believer's ability to trust in the promises of God.

To be fair though, while there are places where Marshall's exegesis might be called into question, it can hardly be doubted that overall it is a fine attempt to provide a sound exegesis of the biblical texts in question. But as we edge toward testing Marshall's exegesis of the warnings in Hebrews, it might be helpful to restate the book's overall thesis first.

C. Statement of Marshall's Thesis

The overall thesis of Marshall's work is summarized by one of the earliest reviewers of the second [1975] edition of his book: "The thesis of Marshall's work is that the predominant Augustinian-Calvinist orientation of evangelicalism, which postulates the unqualified final triumph of the elect believer, is a deduction not from Scripture but from a fallible *a priori* philosophical and dogmatic schema."¹⁹ While it may be possible to state Marshall's thesis in this manner, it is to be noted that these are not his very words, or even that this is the manner in which he would like his main thesis to be stated. At the most, this statement would amount to a deduction from the overall theological framework within which Marshall constructs his argument. So, to be fair, Marshall's concern is broader and of a more practical nature, having to do more with the extent to which the Christian life is able to endure temptation. Put in the form of a question, the issue raised by Marshall is this: "...is it possible for temptation and sin to crush and destroy the life of the Christian? If entire sanctification is a dubious possibility, is complete apostasy also an impossibility in the Christian life?" (*KBPG*, 22-23). As Marshall elaborates further,

The question then arises whether the Christian can be infallibly certain of final victory in his battle against temptation or is in danger of defeat. We must ask whether Christians are predestined to emerge victoriously from the conflict and whether the nature of the life which is bestowed upon them by God is such that it cannot possibly be lost. On the other hand, if the Christian may possibly suffer defeat, we must ask whether such defeat is permanent in its effect, so that it is impossible to regain faith in Jesus Christ and eternal life, or may be merely temporary with the possibility of restoration of the former relationship with God (*Ibid.*, 23).

¹⁹ Demarest, "Review of *KBPG*," 144.

A little later, Marshall clarifies the point of his investigation: “This is the question whether it is possible for a man who has truly become a Christian and an heir to the life of heaven to fall away from his faith and be finally lost” (Ibid., 24). At the conclusion of his investigation, he notes that throughout the entire study “...our interest has been focused on the basic question whether a person who has received salvation through faith in Jesus Christ can lose the divine gift and in the end fail to enter the heavenly kingdom of God” (Ibid., 191). Speaking of “salvation as a result of a new birth,” Marshall rephrases the question: “A definite change takes place in the nature of the believer through the work of the Spirit, and the question may be raised whether such a change is irreversible” (Ibid., 194).

In the end though, Marshall’s answer to the question is unequivocal. In every section of the Bible, as well as the intertestamental and Rabbinic literature, that Marshall examines, he concludes that the evidence indicates that absolute apostasy from the faith is possible. Summing up the evidence from the New Testament, he states,

Moreover, there is never any suggestion that baptism, the outward sign of new birth, cannot be undone—although it is equally true that it is never said to be repeatable—and it is not unlikely that the possibility of the new birth itself being annulled is also to be found. In short, it would be false to assume that the conception of salvation in the New Testament excludes the possibility of the believer falling away (Ibid. 195).

D. Summary of Marshall’s Treatment of the Warning Passages

In order to arrive at a fair assessment of Marshall’s treatment of apostasy in Hebrews, it is important to identify the specific problem that he attempts to address in his chapter on Hebrews and show how his exegesis of the warning passages reflects upon this problem. The simplest way to do this is to follow the sequence of Marshall’s treatment of this subject in this chapter, which is the procedure that will be adopted here. Marshall begins by identifying the main concern of the chapter and the overall theological framework within which the author of Hebrews operates. He states his main concern as follows:

The problem with which we are concerned in this study arises especially from a comparison of certain so-called ‘warning passages’ in the Epistle to the Hebrews (above all Hebrews 6:4-8; 10:26-31; cf. 12:15-17) with other passages in the New Testament, particularly in the writings of Paul and John. The passages in

Hebrews appear to teach the possibility of backsliding and apostasy in the Christian life, whilst several passages in Paul and John emphasize more the eternal security of the believer (*KBPG*, 137).

Marshall further specifies the nature of the apostasy envisioned by the author of Hebrews "...as a drift into an apathy which was content to abide under the shelter of Judaism and thus to lose its grip upon Christ" (*Ibid.*). This is especially important because the "central theme of the Epistle...is concerned with the finality of the gospel" (*Ibid.*, 137-38). In other words, the author presents the Christian faith "as God's final revelation of salvation to men," so that "there can be no question of turning aside from Jesus even to Moses" (*Ibid.*, 138). Therefore, "Only those who hold fast to the end will inherit the promises of God" (*Ibid.*). Because, for the author, "salvation is primarily...a future expectation" and "the work of Christ in heaven for believers" is stressed "to the almost complete neglect of His work in the believer," faith in Hebrews "is more a cable which links believers to heaven than a means by which they are already raised to a heavenly existence" (*Ibid.*). All of this means, therefore, that "there is more stress...on the need for perseverance and on the danger of apostasy before the goal is attained" (*Ibid.*).

With this overview of the overarching direction of the author's argument about salvation and apostasy in the background, Marshall then turns specifically to address "the implications of the warning passages," noting that they "form an integral part of a structure in which dogmatic theology and practical exhortations are intricately bound up together" (*Ibid.*, 138-39). Beginning with 2:1-4, Marshall notes that this "first warning passage drives home the lesson of the opening chapter" (*Ibid.*, 139). For Marshall, because of Jesus' "paramount position" as "high priest" and "Son," the warning against "drifting away" has dire consequence for Christians—they will not escape. Clearly, this applies to all Christians, since the author even includes himself when he "distinctly uses the preacher's 'we'" (*Ibid.*). "The only response that will save them from willful rebellion and its results is to pay the closest attention to the message and so to avoid slipping away from it" (p. 139).

Turning to the second warning passage (3:7-4:13), Marshall is careful to point out that "the writer is addressing Christians—they are 'holy brethren' and 'sharers in Christ' (3:1, 14)" (*KBPG*, 140). But he

notes further that their “continuing membership of God’s household is conditional upon perseverance” (Ibid.). So, like the wilderness generation which failed to enter God’s promised rest, “God’s people may once again slip away from Him and find that they exhausted His patience” (Ibid.). Clearly, then, this passage holds out the possibility of apostasy for Christians who fail to persevere and enter into God’s promised rest: the readers must “hold fast to their first faith and not to fall into the backsliding which leads to exclusion from God’s promises” (Ibid.).

In the lengthiest warning passage (5:11-6:20), Marshall maintains that the danger of Christians “slipping from the faith and coming under divine judgment” continues from the previous warning passage. But here the author’s first course of action is “to rouse the readers from intellectual and spiritual lethargy;” for since they had “become sluggish of hearing,” it would be necessary to prepare them ahead before launching them into the more advanced teaching about the high priesthood of Christ (Heb 5:11), (Ibid., 140-41). It is this advanced doctrine about Christ that would prove to be the necessary cure for their spiritual lethargy that puts them in danger of slipping back into apostasy.

But even the very positive exhortation that follows immediately for the readers to progress beyond the initial Christian beginnings and toward maturity (6:1-2) is read by Marshall as the antidote to “backsliding and even apostasy.” Indeed, “...the writer is urging his readers to press on to maturity as the best defence against backsliding, and he does so with the proviso of God’s permission, since there may be among his readers those who have in fact slipped so far back that it is impossible for them to profit even by a repetition of elementary doctrine” (Ibid. 141). Furthermore, as Marshall sees it, the following verses (6:4-6) deal with “the question of those who cannot be restored to repentance,” and the first question to answer is “who is thought of as performing the task of restoring backsliders” (Ibid.). He concludes that it is not so much a question of “who might be able to restore the lapsed, but the fact that the lapsed cannot be restored...[so that] the passage gives us no right to assert that there may be a special intervention of God to restore those whom men cannot restore” (Ibid.).

The other major problem that Marshall deals with is the identity of those who “cannot be restored to repentance”—that is, whether they were genuine Christians or not. After examining the four descriptions of those who lapsed (6:4b-6b), Marshall determines that “the conclusion is irresistible that real Christians are meant” (Ibid., 144). After rejecting the view of Calvin and Owen that “the passage refers to apostasy by unbelievers,” he states further: “The view which has commended itself to us is the so-called ‘saved and lost’ theory. On this view a Christian may be saved and then lost through deliberate apostasy” (Ibid.). At the conclusion of the treatment of this passage, Marshall also states categorically: “We seem, indeed, to be compelled to allow that a person may go so far in apostasy that God refuses him the opportunity of repentance. In this passage exegetical honesty demands that this possibility is at least raised” (Ibid., 147).

We turn now to the next warning passage that Marshall addresses (10:19-39). As Marshall sees it, the danger involved here is “the same danger as that which has already been described, but now it is described as willful or deliberate sin” (Ibid.). Again Marshall insists that, like the previous warnings, Christian believers are clearly the objects of the danger being warned against: “The writer says ‘if *we* sin,’ and the word ‘we’ cannot refer to any other group of people than his readers and himself” (Ibid.). Furthermore, he insists that the descriptions of the sin of these Christians is nothing short of apostasy from Christ—“Such a sin is an act of total rejection of God” (Ibid., 148). But while Marshall is clear that the sin described in this passage is egregious enough as to bar the sinner once for all from reconciliation with God, he tempers his judgment by noting that “the passage is again a hypothetical one, in the sense that it refers to a danger threatening the readers and not a sin into which they had actually fallen” (Ibid., 149).

On the final warning passage (12:12-13:19), we may sum up Marshall’s position by way of his characterization of Esau’s sin and forfeiture of his birthright. First, the possibility “that somebody may draw back from the grace of God...indicates that an erstwhile believer is meant” (Ibid.). Second, such a person is a “malignant member” of the church who is likely to defile the other members. Finally, such a person is like Esau, whose irreligion is reflected in the surrender of his birthright for a single meal. As a result, Esau forfeited the

blessing, since “he found no opportunity to repent.” Marshall’s conclusion is unequivocal:

Esau’s tears were of no avail in securing the blessing which he had forfeited. The implication is that it is possible for a man to go so far in sin that he misses the blessing which he might once have received; God may not permit him an opportunity of repentance. Not all sinners go this far; but an apostate may well find that he has stretched the mercy of God to its limit, so that he cannot return.” (Ibid., 150).

This then is a summary of Marshall’s conclusion arising from his exegesis of the warning passages. His reading of these texts paints a consistent picture throughout: “the danger of failing to press on towards Christian maturity...could lead to total apostasy from the faith” (Ibid., 151). As he sees it, “The author clearly believed that Christians could fall into this plight” (Ibid.). In the remainder of the chapter, Marshall deals with two matters. First, he attempts to show that the overall tone of Hebrews is not negative. He states, “We should be wrong to think that the danger confronting Christians is the primary theme of the author. His main purpose is to encourage his readers to enter into a mature Christian experience...” (Ibid., 152).

Second, he reflects upon four themes in Hebrews having to do with the work of God in the believer. But it is not entirely clear why Marshall addresses the first theme of election and predestination, since he regards these as really insignificant as far as the overall argument of Hebrews is concerned. But perhaps it is his way of reminding readers that the book of Hebrews provides no support for the Augustinian-Calvinistic view of the perseverance of the saints that is derived more logically from a theological system than from a proper exegesis of Scripture (see Ibid., 25). The discussion on the second work of God in the believer, namely, the faithfulness of God, is summed up in the statement that “Human faith is possible only because of divine faithfulness” (Ibid., 154).²⁰

²⁰ Since this point is a rather minor issue in the whole run of Marshall’s argument, I will offer a brief critique here and not return to it later. To begin with, I find this discussion of the faithfulness of God as “a work of God in the believer” to be somewhat odd. It is certainly true that “Human faith is possible only because of divine faithfulness.” This is a truism in all of Scripture, even if Hebrews does not quite put it this way. But the real question is this: how is this faithfulness of God a work in the believer? What Marshall actually discusses in the remainder of the [Footnote continued on next page ...]

The third work of God has to do with the help Jesus provides for those who are tempted. Marshall explains this as Christ's work of intercession for those who draw near to God in prayer. So "Christians can call upon God for help in time of need and be certain of an answer to their prayer" (Ibid., 155). This is further explained as akin to the thought of 13:20-21 to the effect that "God will equip men to do His will by working in them what pleases Him" (Ibid.). In other words, "There is divine help to enable Christians to progress in obedience and hence to save them from falling back" (Ibid.).

The final work of God concerns the pioneer and perfecter of faith. This means, first of all, that "Jesus is the originator of faith in the sense that He Himself displayed it in His steadfast endurance of suffering (Hebrews 12:3) and thus made open the way of faith to men" (Ibid., 156). That Christ was made perfect, therefore, refers to "the moral and cultic perfection of Christ as a man who was perfectly obedient to God...and therefore fit to be a high priest"—"it means that he experienced "suffering and death in which he learned obedience" (Ibid.). Furthermore, "It is this perfection which Christ gives to believers," for since "in Him faith is seen to perfection...He is [also] the One who perfects their faith" (Ibid.).²¹

section is human "faith" and not the faithfulness of God. What is more, his definition of faith seems rather confusing. For although "faith is not to be regarded as a human achievement," it is at the same time something that "arises when a man lets himself be convinced by God and so attains to a certainty which is objectively grounded and transcends all human possibilities in its reliability" (Ibid., 154; citing E. Kaseman here). How is faith not a human achievement when it cannot arise unless a man "lets himself be convinced by God?" In the same way, one must certainly wonder how confidence and rejoicing, like faith, "are to be regarded as divine gifts" (Ibid., 154-55). If all of these are divine gifts, are they not also the divine means already possessed by believers that ensure their perseverance?

²¹ From this understanding of Jesus as "pioneer and perfecter of faith," it is worth citing Marshall's conclusion and then providing a critique. He states, "The conclusion to be drawn is that Jesus is the supreme example of faith who leads His people into a like faith. He has perfected believers by His sacrifice for them, but this does not preclude the possibilities of progress and of retrogression. We have found that great provision has been made by God in Christ for believers in order that they may have a strong faith and attain to perfection; but we have not found evidence of a divine work in the hearts of men which absolutely precludes the possibility of apostasy." First, we may note that the kind of faith that Jesus leads his people into is [Footnote continued on next page ...]

in quality like that of Jesus, and as a result we are led to wonder whether such a quality of faith like that of Jesus can atrophy and die.

Second, Marshall is not clear as to what it means that Jesus, by the sacrifice of himself once for all, has perfected those who are being sanctified (see Heb 10:14; cf. v 10). His earlier statement comes closest to an explanation: “He bestows upon men His own status as an obedient Son of God, and with Him they receive glory from the God whose purpose is to bring many sons to glory” (Ibid., 156). But aside from being a rather roundabout statement, it also reflects a forensic understanding of Jesus’ perfection of the believer. That is to say, Jesus perfects believers by giving to them [as a gift] “his own status” as one who is made perfect by being “an obedient Son of God.” If this is so, we must wonder about two things: (1) on what basis was this status bestowed, and (2) whether this status as a gift may be withdrawn and on what basis it may be withdrawn [on the believer’s failure to be obedient?]. Much might be said here in response to these questions, but what is most significant is the means by which it is said that Jesus has perfected believers, namely, by his once-for-all time sacrifice (10:14). As William Lane has noted, the accent falls on the clause “‘he decisively purged forever,’ where the perfect tense of the verb *tet el ei wken* in combination with the temporal expression *ei j Vt o; di hneke V* emphasizes the permanent result of Christ’s offering. The writer locates the decisive purging [understanding “perfection” in a cultic sense] of believers in the past with respect to its accomplishment and in the present with respect to its enjoyment” (*Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47B [Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991], 267). It is this definitive act that has once for all secured the consecration of his people, whom the author refers to as “those who are being sanctified.” And as Lane again points out, “If the present participle *to u Va Jgiazone nou Vis* a timeless designation of the community of faith, it describes the result of Christ’s sacrifice, which confers on his people definitive consecration, qualifying them for fellowship with God” (Ibid., 267-68). This is not a conferral of “status” in the sense that Marshall speaks of as above. Rather, this is a real accomplishment that has once for all sanctified believers (cf. 2:11, where Christ is the one who makes his people holy, and as well 13:12, like 10:14, where Christ is the one who consecrates his people to serve God by his own blood and sacrifice). We must ask then whether this decisive redemptive accomplishment of the cross is reversible for those who are already the beneficiaries of this work.

One more point needs to be made here. Especially in light of the New Covenant context of Hebrews 10:14, I also find Marshall’s explanation of Jesus’ perfection of believers inadequate. To make the point again, soteriological-forensic category is barely, if at all, part of the language of Hebrews [as it is, for example, in Paul]. Second, the context of Hebrews 10:14 in particular is the fulfillment of the New Covenant, which Hebrews sees as already being fulfilled in the sacrificial work of Christ and being experienced in the Christian community. Amazingly, Marshall completely ignores this New Covenant context of the perfection of Christ and the concomitant result of the perfection of believers. Certainly, the perfection of believers “does not preclude the possibilities of progress and retrogression” (*KBPG*, [Footnote continued on next page ...])

E. Critique of Marshall's Treatment of the Warning Passages

We come now to a more formal assessment of Marshall's treatment and interpretation of these warning passages. First, we will make a few general observations about Marshall's overall approach and then attempt to venture a critique of some specific points of exegesis and interpretation from passage to passage.

1. General Observations

First, from the point of view of the harmony of Scripture, it has been noted that it would seem that Marshall sets up the problem that he addresses in this chapter in a way that pits the author of Hebrews off against Paul and other New Testament writers as far as their respective views of salvation and apostasy are concerned (see *KBPG*, 137).²² In this regard, we are obliged to make two points. First, this way of stating the problem suggests that Hebrews has nothing to say

157). But it seems it would be going beyond the evidence to say that, for those who have begun to experience the blessings of the New Covenant fulfillment of Christ's perfection, "we have not found evidence of a divine work in the hearts of men which absolutely precludes the possibility of apostasy" (Ibid.). If this is so, what would be the advantage of the New Covenant conditions for the people of God? In fact, it seems that the qualitative value of the conditions of the New Covenant over the Old for believers is what the author points out in 10:15-18, namely, that the Law will be written and inscribed upon their hearts and their sins and lawlessness will be remembered no more. Again, all of this is the result of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. With the definitive New Covenant once-for-all sacrifice of Christ comes also a definitive enabling of believers that is indicative of a change of heart. The sacrificial "blood of Christ" has worked decisively to "purify our consciences from dead works to serve the living God," (9:14b). We may conclude, then, that "those who have begun to experience the transforming power of this new covenant mediated by Jesus' high priesthood will continue to show the persevering faith that is needed, based not on changeable human ability but on the sustaining power of God at work within them" (Buist M. Fanning, "A Classical Reformed View," in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV, pp. 172-219 [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007], 205).

²² That is to say, Hebrews clearly teaches that a genuine believer can apostatize and lose his salvation, but other passages in the New Testament teach the eternal security of believers. Methodologically, this is problematic, since this way of stating the problem begins with the assumption that the problem of the warning passages lays outside of Hebrews, not within Hebrews itself. In other words, Hebrews provides no evidence of assurance absolutely guaranteeing that believers will persevere to the end, since the warnings indicate the possibility of the loss of salvation already possessed. As we shall see presently, not all agree with Marshall.

about the assurance and security of believers, and, therefore, that the real problem is not with the warning passages themselves in Hebrews. That is to say that these warnings clearly point to the possibility of Christian apostasy, but the problem arises when we try to harmonize this with other New Testament passages that seem to move in the opposite direction of the eternal security of believers. In other words, this indicates that those who deny that the warning passages teach that believers can apostatize are not reading Hebrews on its own merit but are attempting to Harmonize Hebrews with other parts of the New Testament.²³

But not all would agree with Marshall on this point, and indeed, some have argued that there is a strong note on the believer's assurance and security in Hebrews.²⁴ To take an example, after what might be considered the strongest warning (6:4-8), the author follows up as well with possibly the strongest note of assurance (6:9-20). What is most interesting about this interplay between warning and encouragement is the author's style of movement between the first/second person and third person. When he wants to encourage, he typically speaks in the first/second person (6:1-3/6:9-12), but when he warns he turns to the third person (6:4-8).²⁵ So, "In the case of *those*" in danger of falling away, it is impossible to renew them to repentance (6:4-6), but "In *your* case...we are convinced of better things pertaining to salvation" (6:9f).²⁶

²³ It should be pointed out, of course, that Marshall reads these other New Testament passages differently from those who take them at face value to teach the eternal security of the believer, as seen in his treatment of them in the rest of the book. But he still acknowledges the tension that exists between passages on promises of assurance and warnings against apostasy and attempts some kind of "harmony" or resolution, especially in his conclusion.

²⁴ For a very good discussion on this note of assurance and security in Hebrews, see Fanning, "Classical Reformed View," 193-205. Note also the work of Gerald L. Borchert, *Assurance and Warning* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1987), upon which Fanning builds his case.

²⁵ For this same pattern, cf. 10:19-39. Also, for a more extensive treatment of this pattern, see my published dissertation, *A Case For Mixed-Audience with Reference to the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews* (New York: Peter Lang, Inc., 2008), 229-234.

²⁶ The "better things concerning salvation" is probably best taken as a reference to the "blessings [of salvation] received from God" in 6:7. While the warning no doubt is addressed to the congregation as a whole, the one thing that the
[Footnote continued on next page ...]

This pattern of encouragement and assurance may be seen elsewhere throughout the book of Hebrews. Following the first brief warning in 2:1-4, the author moves on to discuss what Jesus has accomplished for his people (2:5-16), in order that he might become their merciful and faithful high priest (2:17). Thus, as “merciful and faithful high priest...who makes atonement for [his] people,” Jesus “is able to help those who are tempted” (2:17b-18).²⁷ Jesus’ high priesthood also plays a significant role in the context of the second warning passage as well (3:7-4:13). As Fanning rightly points out, it

author is convinced about is that the blessings of salvation pertain to them. What is more, in the rest of the chapter, the author grounds this confidence in the character of God and not in the ability of Christians to persevere (Ibid., 193-94).

²⁷As Borchert points out again, “This initial reference...to Jesus as High Priest points to the basis of a Christian’s assurance” (*Assurance and Warning*, 164). It is important to define more closely here the nature and extent of the help that Jesus, as high priest, provides for his people who are tempted. First, in the broader sweep of the book of Hebrews, the temptation of believers mentioned here, may be a veiled reference to the apostasy envisioned throughout the book. If so, what kind of help is Jesus able to provide for his people who are tempted to fall away? Much might be said here, but the most straightforward answer may be found in 7:25, bearing in mind that 7:1-10:25 form the core of the book’s treatment of the high priesthood of Christ. We may summarize the author’s point leading up to 7:25 as follows. Because “the law [Levitical system] made nothing perfect...a better hope is introduced” (7:11, 19), and “accordingly, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant” (7:22). Furthermore, since Jesus “holds his priesthood permanently, in that he lives forever” (7:24), “In this way he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (7:25). Here I believe we have one of the clearest statements of the security of the believer, based entirely on the nature of the priesthood of Christ. That is to say, to the extent that Christ’s priesthood continues, to the same extent he continues to intercede for his people, and to that same extent his people are held secure, since his intercession for his people is unbroken. His ability to save them now [note the use of the present tense infinitive *sw/vzein*] through his intercessory ministry continues unbroken, resulting in their final salvation. Lane says it best, “He has a sustained interest in the welfare of his people. The perfection and eternity of the salvation he mediates is guaranteed by the unassailable character of his priesthood” (*Hebrews 1-8*, 189-90). On the efficacy of Christ’s intercessory work for his people, it is worth quoting Bruce here: “The appearance in ‘God’s presence of the Crucified One constitutes his perpetual and prevalent intercession. His once-completed self-offering is utterly acceptable and efficacious; his contact with the Father is immediate and unbroken; his priestly ministry on his people’s behalf is never ending and therefore the salvation which he secures to them is absolute” (*Hebrews*, 175).

is “Jesus’ faithfulness as high priest (2:17)” that becomes the springboard for the author’s discussion of him as “faithful Son” over God’s household.²⁸ As faithful Son, whom Christians confess as high priest (3:1), Jesus is now over God’s household, which household is made up of Christians—“we are his household” (3:6b; cf. v. 14).²⁹

It is important to notice that the context of 3:1-6 sets up both a contrast and a comparison between Jesus and Moses: both are faithful (3:2), but by contrast Jesus is superior in as much as he is the “builder of the house” of which Moses is a part (3:3-5). Clearly the reference to Moses and Jesus has covenantal overtones—Moses representing the Old Covenant and Jesus the initiator of the New Covenant. But the point of the contrast is to set up the context for the warning that follows in 3:7-4:13. Among the people who form the household of the New Covenant community, there must not be found any who are unfaithful like the wilderness generation who failed to enter God’s rest (3:12). But this contrast is played out further in 4:2-3: while the wilderness generation failed to enter because “they did not join in with those who heard the message in faith” (4:2), the author was able to say of his audience and himself, “we who have believed do enter into that rest” (4:3; cf. v. 10). This is an amazingly bold statement on the part of the author. For what he denies the wilderness generation, namely, that “they could not enter [this rest]” (3:19, 4:8), he boldly affirms of himself and his community, namely, “we do enter this rest” (4:3; cf. 4:10).³⁰ This is certainly reassuring for the believer in a context that warns so sternly against failure to enter this rest, as was the case with the wilderness generation.³¹

²⁸ “Classical Reformed View,” 195.

²⁹ The entire conditional statement of 3:6, of which this clause forms the apodosis, is much discussed and will be addressed later.

³⁰ While some have denied that the verb (Eijsercomeqa) is a true present (see G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], 786), the judgment of Lane is most certainly correct: “...the bold assertion...‘for we do enter that rest,’ implies more than proleptic enjoyment of what God has promised. The present tense of the verb is to be regarded as a true present and not simply viewed as future in reference. God’s promise is predicated upon reality, and believers are already to enjoy the rest referred to in the quotation of Ps 95:11” (*Hebrews 1-8*, 99).

³¹ It is a matter of debate whether believers in the current era, who have already entered into God’s rest, may forfeit entrance into their final eschatological [Footnote continued on next page ...]

A second point regarding the way in which Marshall sets up the problem he addresses seems rather ironic, since he does advocate that Hebrews affirms the confidence and assurance of believers to persevere. He notes that “There is divine help to enable Christians to progress in obedience and hence to save them from falling back”³² (*KBPG*, 155). Obviously, Marshall realizes the tension, especially throughout the broader context of the New Testament, between passages that warn against apostasy and those that give assurance of

rest at the consummation. Two things seem fairly clear. First, the citation of Psalm 95 by the author in this passage clearly points to an eschatological understanding of rest. This means that the warning of 4:7b includes, among other things, “an announcement of the eschatological time of salvation,” which time has now arrived “with the speaking of God through his Son (1:1-2a)” (Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 101). Second, what is also clear is that those who believe have already entered into this rest (see f.n. #29 above). By faith, therefore, Christians have begun already to participate in a real sense in this rest, although there is a sense in which there still “remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (4:9). But a third matter needs to be considered. In light of the admonition of 4:11 to “make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by following the same pattern of disobedience”, how are we to understand this relationship between this already-not yet experience of God’s rest? Can those who have believed and already entered God’s rest forfeit entrance into this consummated-rest through unbelief? Lane argues that the admonition in 4:11 “presupposes what was said in v 3, that God’s rest is entered by believing,” so that this “future” or “consummated-rest” may “be forfeited through careless and hardened disposition” (*Ibid.*, 102). Although Marshall barely discusses the passage, his conclusion is the same: “Those who are disobedient and faithless will fail to enter into rest” (*KBPG*, 140). This conclusion though may be a little premature. For while the appeal concerns the whole community, the actual warning is focused on individuals within the community. As I have argued elsewhere, 4:1-11 is a neat, self-contained unit, bracketed at both ends (vv 1, 11) by a concern for individuals within the community who are in danger (see *Case for Mixed-Audience*, 217-29). And it is clear from 4:2 that the author distinguishes between those who embraced the message by faith and those who did not join in with them in the wilderness community. There seems to be a parallel situation, therefore, with the New Covenant community, so that there are some who show evidence of lack of faith and are in danger of apostatizing. It is these concerning whom the author fears, who might be in danger of not entering God’s rest, not those who have already believed and enter God’s rest.

³² He states further that even “Human faith is possible only because of divine faithfulness” (*Ibid.*, 154). And again, he concludes, “If in Hebrews the possibility of apostasy is depicted more radically than elsewhere in the New Testament, it is equally true that this Epistle is second to none in its emphasis upon the faithfulness of God who will perfect His people...” (*Ibid.*, 157).

final perseverance. But consistently he ends up making the perseverance of believers contingent on their own faithfulness. Thus, for example, “God...will perfect his people,” but only “as they hold fast their confidence in Him to the end” (*KBPG*, 157).³³ Marshall seems to want to have it both ways: both the faith and confidence that Christians exercise and their final protection are the ultimate work of God, but all of this depends upon their ability to hold fast to the end. For, as Marshall himself puts it, “we have not found evidence of a divine work in the hearts of men which absolutely precludes the possibility of apostasy” (*Ibid.*). We may well agree, then, with Carson’s evaluation of the direction of Marshall’s logic: “The resulting formulation always makes the preservation of God’s people unto consummated salvation absolutely contingent: God is the one who faithfully preserves his people, provided they do not defect.”³⁴

The Second general observation about Marshall’s presentation has to do with his understanding of salvation in Hebrews. While he acknowledges a present aspect of salvation, he is clear that in Hebrews “salvation is primarily...a future expectation” (*KBPG*, 138). Marshall further develops this “already-not yet” concept of salvation later, taking into account the New Testament as a whole (*Ibid.* 193-94). He is clear that the new eschatological era of salvation has already dawned and that Christians are already in some sense participating in this salvation. As far as the book of Hebrews is concerned, Marshall sees this concept of salvation portrayed in terms of “the idea of pilgrimage as the form of life of God’s people” (*Ibid.*, 195). As such, Christians are “‘strangers and pilgrims’ in this world, looking forward to the coming of Christ to bring them full salvation (Heb 9:28)” (*Ibid.*, 138). The real question for him though is whether this present participation in salvation means that Christians cannot apostatize or that they are bound to reach their final destination. His conclusion is unequivocal: “In short, it would be false to assume that

³³ Again, he states, “There is no reason why they must fall from their faith...for God has provided amply for their salvation, but at the same time they must continually see to it that they progress towards Christian maturity lest through indifference they drift away from the faith and end up in the fearful plight of the apostate” (*Ibid.*).

³⁴ “Reflection on Assurance,” 263.

[this] conception of salvation in the New Testament excludes the possibility of the believer falling away” (Ibid.).

Marshall is certainly correct that salvation has a predominantly futuristic orientation in Hebrews. But there is also a fair representation of the already present enjoyment of salvation by believers in Hebrews. Taken by itself, 2:3-4, for example, clearly seems to open up the possibility that an already possessed salvation can be jeopardized by carelessness.³⁵ On the other hand, salvation is spoken of as something that is already secured for the believer once and for all by the sacrifice of Christ (see 1:3; 5:9-10; 9:14, 24-26; 10:10, 14, 18). Moreover, as we have seen, 7:25 speaks of the unbroken intercessory work of Christ that will ensure the final and complete salvation of his people.³⁶ More specifically, the emphasis in 7:25 is on the ability of Jesus through his unceasing intercessory ministry “to save” his people “completely” because of the permanency of his priesthood (7:24). While affirming that salvation in Hebrews “is presented as a future eschatological inheritance (1:14; 5:9; 9:28),” Lane is equally clear that there is “a definite sense in which the community has already begun to participate in salvation as a result of the obedience and sacrificial death of Christ and his subsequent exaltation (cf. 2:3-4; 6:4-5, 9).”³⁷ He notes further that the “present tense of *swzein* reflects the present experience of the community and suggests that Jesus’ support is available at each critical moment.”³⁸

So then, the evidence in Hebrews suggests that salvation is presented both as a future inheritance and a present enjoyment, and there is no conflict. The question therefore is whether those who now enjoy this salvation in the present may forfeit its consummated

³⁵ We may add here all the other warnings which seem to suggest likewise.

³⁶ On this, see discussion above (page 10, especially f.n. #26).

³⁷ Hebrews 1-8, 189.

³⁸ Ibid. While this is a very helpful point, Lane’s statement falls short in that it misses the magnitude and extent of the help provided by Jesus. Jesus’ support is not merely “available,” as if the believer may choose to appropriate such help or not—no! Rather, Jesus is able to save his people completely precisely because he lives forever and because this is what he lives for. The purpose for which he always lives is to intercede for his people, and in doing so, this is how he saves his people. His intercession for his people is not dependent on whether or not his people avail themselves of it.

blessedness through neglect or outright renunciation. Marshall has not demonstrated this to be so here. But the answer to this must await an evaluation of Marshall's actual exegesis of the warning passages. To this we shall now turn.

2. Specific Points of Exegesis

In what follows, the procedure will be quite simple. We will simply follow the sequence of the treatment of the warning passages as presented in Marshall's work.

Hebrews 2:1-4

We have already made passing reference to Marshall's treatment of this passage above, but there are two things to note here. First, although there is not much to be offered by way of critique here, this may be due to the fact that Marshall's treatment is quite brief, even sketchy. Second, in view of this sketchy treatment though, one might be a little surprised at how quickly Marshall arrives at the sweeping conclusion that "At no point in the Epistle is it warrantable to assume that the readers originally addressed...are not Christians" (Ibid., 139). In other words, at this point in his exegesis, Marshall has not [and could hardly have] demonstrated this sweeping conclusion. In addition, that "the author distinctly uses the preacher's 'we'" can hardly mean that he implicates himself in the warning. As I have noted earlier,³⁹ there is a general sense in which the author includes himself along with his audience, but this is for rhetorical effect as any good preacher would do when the need arises. Therefore, the use of "we" does not necessarily mean everyone in the audience, including, the author, is implicated in the danger of "drifting" away. In fact, what may be more noticeable in Hebrews is the author's penchant for subtly making distinctions in his community.⁴⁰ The real danger for the readers in this passage is that of "drifting" away from, or neglecting the gospel, which in the view of the author carries severe consequence. At this stage though neither the precise nature of the "drifting" or the consequence is known; and neither also do we know

³⁹ See f.n. #30; see also *Case for Mixed-Audience*, 234-35. More will be said on the author's use of "we" when we get to 10:19-39, esp. v 39.

⁴⁰ See Ibid., 201ff.

whether the author implicates the entire community. At least, Marshall's judgement must be suspended until further investigation.

Hebrews 3:7-14

Some of the issues in Marshall's treatment of this warning have already been addressed above.⁴¹ Suffice it to say again though that the treatment of this passage is very sketchy. Marshall summarizes the warning in this passage by noting the "comparison of Israel and the church and of salvation and the rest promised to the people of God" (*KBPG*, 140). Using 3:1-6 as his starting point, Marshall not only concludes that "the author is addressing Christians," but that Christians are defined as God's household "only if they display the same faithfulness [like Jesus and Moses]" (*Ibid.*). This means, in other words, that "continuing membership in God's household is conditional upon perseverance" (*Ibid.*).⁴² The real problem with Marshall's interpretation is his understanding of the conditional statements in 3:6 & 14 ["We are of his household, if in fact we hold firmly to our confidence..." / "we have become partners with Christ, if in fact we hold our initial confidence firm until the end"]. If the relationship between the protasis and the apodosis in these statements is one of cause and effect, as Marshall understands it, then his conclusion is certainly correct. Christians, then, belong to God's household or are partners of Christ *because* they persevere. This means that perseverance is the effective *cause* of our belonging to God's household, not the effect of belonging to God's household.

But, in fact, the cause-effect relationship is not the only, or even the best, way of understanding these statements. Indeed, the nature of these statements is better understood in an evidence-inference manner.⁴³ Understood in this way, "the author indicates that holding firmly to one's initial confidence and hope is the evidence [not the cause] that one belongs to God's family or has become a partaker of

⁴¹ See pp 11-12 above.

⁴² I have addressed the semantics of the kind of conditional statement present in this passage (3:6, 14) elsewhere (see *Case for Mixed-Audience*, 181-96), to which I refer the reader.

⁴³ On this category, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 683. See Also, *Case for Mixed-Audience*, 182-93.

Christ.”⁴⁴ Christians, then, are by definition those who persevere to the end. This is the key to understanding this warning passage. Like the wilderness generation who failed to enter God’s rest, those in the Christian community who fail to persevere, demonstrate that they did not in the first place belong to the household of God or were partners of Christ.⁴⁵ When Marshall notes that “the implication of Hebrews 4:11-13...[is] that apparent outward conformity to the faith is useless if it is not accompanied by heart belief,” he comes very close to the truth. What he fails to realize is that this “apparent outward conformity” was the reality in the community that the author was addressing. This kind of faith does not make one belong to God’s household or become partaker of Christ. This kind of faith does not constitute the kind of faith the author envisioned. For in Hebrews, faith is by definition persevering faith.

Hebrews 5:11-6:20

This warning is given the lengthiest treatment by Marshall, but even so, about a half of the discussion is taken up with the views of Calvin, Owen, and others. Noting that the purpose of the whole section is to “rouse readers from intellectual and spiritual lethargy before the doctrine of the high priesthood of Christ is expounded,” Marshall’s main concern is to demonstrate that the descriptions in 6:4-6 undeniably show that the author has Christians in mind. Marshall is certainly right that the concern of the warning is not about who might [or might not] be able to restore those who fall away, but “the fact that the lapsed cannot be restored” (*KBPG*, 138). The more difficult problem though is “the identity” of those who cannot be restored to repentance. They are identified by five descriptive statements: “those who have once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become partakers of the Holy Spirit, tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and have committed apostasy” (6:4b-6a).

Marshall takes the first four of these descriptions to be decisive evidence of a genuine Christian experience: “This completes the description of the lapsed, and the conclusion is irresistible that real Christians are meant” (*KBPG*, 144). But again this conclusion seems

⁴⁴ *Case for Mixed-Audience*, 185.

⁴⁵ Cf. here 1 John 2:19.

premature. First, it is to be noted that these descriptions are cast in the third person (“In the case of those who were...,” etc.), as opposed to the author’s normal way of addressing the community in the first and second person.⁴⁶ In this way, the author not only distances himself from this group, but also sets them apart in a category by themselves, even though they had been part of the community in general.⁴⁷ Second, Marshall fails to mention that the description comes in a series of *five* participles, *not four*, as he tells us (*KBPG*, 142). This is important, because all the participles are grammatically bound together in a single locus of identity.⁴⁸ To remove a part of this identity is to destroy the entire identity—the grammar demands that they are all kept together as a single unit. This may suggest that if we imagine that the first four descriptions are indications of genuine Christian initiation, by the time we get to the final [“and have fallen away”] it should give us pause. This is why it is important for Marshall to have kept all five descriptions together. In other words, the first four descriptions “indicate positive events that are generally experienced by people who become Christians....[but] 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.”⁴⁹ This distinction in the community is followed up by the illustration of the field metaphor (6:7-8), which describes two distinct pieces of ground, the one giving evidence of a genuine Christian experience [“yields useful vegetation”] and the other bearing “thorns and thistles.” So, at the end of this warning, the author draws the contrast, “But in your case, dear friends, even though we speak like this, we are convinced of better things relating to salvation” (v 9). The author could hardly have been describing a genuine Christian experience of initiation in Christ in

⁴⁶ See pp 10-11 above.

⁴⁷ In this regard, some may have already left the community (cf. 10:25).

⁴⁸ On the grammatical arrangement and semantic significance of this construction [6:4-6], see John A. Sproule, “Parapesomta Vin Hebrews 6:6,” *Grace Theological Journal* 2 (1981): 327-32.

⁴⁹ Wayne Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from the Warning Passages in Hebrews,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner & Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 139.

6:4-6, for he could hardly have been persuaded of better things in their case, since they have fallen away, after sharing in these positive experiences.

Hebrews 10:19-39

Once again, Marshall is no doubt correct in noting that the danger described here is the same as that described earlier. But again Marshall insists that those described as being in danger are “Christian believers.” For in the phrase “if *we* sin...,” the word ‘we’ cannot refer to any other group of people than his readers and himself” (*KBPG*, 147). Again, we admit that in a general sense this is true, but what we said of the author’s use of “we” in 2:1 applies here. The author could hardly mean that he is in danger of committing this willful sin. More than likely, his use of “we” is part of his rhetoric: “the use of ‘we’ is a verbal convention that enables the author to speak of his readers in general, without implying that every one of them is in the situation described in the ‘we’ clauses.”⁵⁰ In addition, and in light of all that has been said already, that the readers have “received the knowledge of the truth” (10:26) may be taken in the same sense of the descriptions of 6:4-6. All who have heard the gospel and come under its influence have to one degree or another been enlightened. But not all who have been enlightened necessarily experience genuine conversion. One may even receive the gospel with great enthusiasm at first, but when tested “endure [only] for a while,” as Jesus taught in the parable of the sower (see Mark 4:16-17).

Marshall also notes that the person who commits the deliberate sin not only tramples the Son of God contemptuously, but also “profanes the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified” (10:29). He further points out that “elsewhere in Hebrews ‘sanctified’ is a description of true Christians” (*KBPG*, 148). It is to be noted though that Hebrews 9:13 uses the word “sanctify” in the more common Old Testament sense of ceremonial cleansing—not in a salvific sense. We may be reminded also of Paul’s use of the word to speak of the believing husband sanctifying the unbelieving wife, and vice versa (see 1 Cor 7:14)—again, hardly in a salvific sense. The argument is not watertight here, but at least it makes Marshall’s argument less

⁵⁰ Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” 176.

conclusive. But taken in conjunction with our view about other descriptions of those who are in danger in Hebrews up to this point, our defense is strengthened further.⁵¹

We must certainly agree with Marshall that the offense involved here is “an act of total rejection of God” (*KBPG*, 148). To conclude though that those addressed in 10:26-31 were once saved but are now in the process of recanting their faith in Christ’s atoning work is unwarranted. This is because Marshall sees this warning as being directed to the entire community without distinction. But again, as in 6:4-6, it is to be noted that the warning is stated in the third person. This is a change from the more positive encouragement of 10:19-25, where the readers are addressed in the first/second person, and to which the author returns in 10:32-39, after his warning in the third person in 10:26-31. In other words, by sandwiching the warning in the third person (10:26-31) between two notes of encouragement (10:19-25 & 10:32-39) the author subtly introduces us to a distinction in his community.

This pattern⁵² in Hebrews indicates that the author might well be aware of an element in his community that has superficially embraced the faith but has not come all the way. It is this element that is in danger of total apostasy from the gospel and for which there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. It is quite possible that some from this group had already apostatized, for as 10:25 indicates some were already in the habit of “abandoning our meetings.”⁵³ If this line of argument is correct, it is the lingering residue from this group within the community that the warnings are meant to awaken to the danger of apostasy, not the entire community. This is why the author distances himself from this element by way of speaking in the third person.

⁵¹ Our argument may be strengthened even further if it is granted that the phrase is translated as “profanes the blood of the covenant by which *it* is sanctified.” This is grammatically possible, and if this is granted, what is actually sanctified is not the person, but the blood of the covenant.

⁵² See *Case for Mixed-Audience*, 229-34.

⁵³ This may throw more doubt on Marshall’s overall argument, since he assumes without argument that the danger of apostasy is “a sin into which they [the readers] had not actually fallen” (*KBPG*, 149).

One curious omission of Marshall’s treatment of 10:19-39 is the author’s “we” [first person plural] of verse 39: “But we are not among those who shrink back and thus perish, but are among those who have faith and preserve their souls” [NET Bible]. Probably nowhere else in Hebrews does the author clearly distinguish two groups within his community than here at 10:39. Verse 39 not only forms a contrast with verses 37-38, but also contains a contrast within itself, which mirrors the contrast between verses 37-38 and verse 39. In verses 37-38, “my righteous one who lives by faith” is contrasted with the one who “draws back.” Picking up on the phrase “the one who draws back” at the end of verse 38, the author reflects upon the situation in his own community in verse 39 in a very positive manner as he did in 6:9⁵⁴ right after his severe warning of 6:4-8. Like the one who “draws back” in verse 38b, there are those in his community who are of the disposition to draw back. And like the righteous one who lives by faith in verse 38a, there are those in his community who “have faith and preserve their souls.”

If Marshall is correct that when the author uses “we” he means the entire community, including himself, it is here that his whole thesis founders. For if “we” in 2:1 and 19:26 means the author and his entire community are susceptible to apostasy and renunciation of the faith, here the author clearly says the opposite—“we are not of the kind that draw back and perish, but of the kind who have faith and preserve their souls.” It is the first kind that is in danger of apostasy, because those in this group do not have faith. But concerning the other kind, the author is very positive, because those in this group “have faith and preserve their souls.”⁵⁵

Hebrews 12:12-13:19

The particular concern of Marshall in this section focuses on 12:13-19 and this involves three points. First, there is “the possibility that somebody may draw back from the grace of God” (*KBPG*, 149). Marshall thinks that this is a reference to an “erstwhile believer” but does not say why this is so? The second is that the community must be weary lest any “malignant member grows up in its midst” and

⁵⁴ “But in your case, dear friends, even though we speak like this, we are convince of better things relating to salvation” (6:9)

⁵⁵ For a fuller treatment of 10:19-39, see *Case for Mixed-Audience*, 210-16.

defile others. The third concerns the illustration of Esau whose irreligion led to his disqualification from receiving the patriarchal blessing. Consequently, Esau not only forfeited the blessing but was given no further opportunity by God to rescind his decision. Marshall's conclusion is "that it is possible for a man to go so far in sin that he misses the blessing which he might once have received; God may not permit him an opportunity of repentance" (Ibid.).

The important question to ask here is whether Esau had already received the blessing and then lost it through his irreligion. Or whether the blessing was something to be gained in the future, but not already possessed. It seems clear from the context that the blessing was not something that Esau had earlier possessed, later lost, and then attempted to regain. Rather, it was yet in the future of Esau to be possessed, for he could not have possessed the blessing until the rite of passage from his father Isaac to him was performed. This is why he found no opportunity for repentance, since by the time he sought the blessing the rite of passage of the blessing was performed in favor of Jacob. And once enacted, it can never be revoked. To be the firstborn, then, is to be in the place of opportunity for securing the blessing. But this position is probationary and may be forfeited through carelessness and contempt. The lesson, therefore, for the community is that some, like Esau, are poised to inherit the blessing of future salvation, but may forfeit it for the same reason as Esau did. They may yet "come short of the grace of God," or "may seem to come short of entering God's rest while the promise remains open" (4:1). The fear of the author is that "some" or "anyone" in the community may turn away from embracing the gospel and forfeit the blessing of salvation. Of the congregation as a whole though, he is confident that this will not happen.

Conclusion

In his summary of the exegesis of the warning passages, Marshall remains rather confident about the danger facing the readers and Christians in general. When Christians fail to press on towards maturity, they run the risk of going backward, and this could ultimately lead to "total apostasy from the faith" (Ibid., 151). This means that there can be no longer any opportunity for repentance that leads to forgiveness. "The author clearly believed that Christians could fall into this plight. But he never states how it could be

determined whether a person had actually gone this far and reached the point of no return” (Ibid., 150-51). As we have attempted to show though, Marshall’s interpretation is not as watertight as he makes it out to be, and this firm conclusion is rather unwarranted. At every turn, not only is his exegesis of the various passages shown to be sketchy, it is found wanting. As we have argued throughout, it seems clear that the author makes distinction within his community between the community as a whole and certain individuals within the community concerning whom he is not confident. He is confident and positive about his community as whole, but he fears that some among them might abandon the faith. It is to these that he addresses his warning, though in an oblique manner. His warnings are typically about “some” or “anyone,” and as well, typically addressed in the third person.

If our judgment of Marshall’s treatment of the warnings in Hebrews is correct, this no doubt casts a shadow on his overall treatment of the New Testament and in particular his thesis, since Hebrews held out the greatest prospect for his argument. The warning passages in Hebrews, then, are a test case of Marshall’s thesis on the perseverance of the saints. If, as we have judged, Marshall’s treatment of the warning passages proves unconvincing, then his overall thesis about the New Testament that a true believer may apostatize completely from the gospel is called into question.



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