
Exegesis 15: Falling Away

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A consideration of Hebrews 6, verses 4-6, the problems it raises and the solutions proposed.

The problems

This passage has always been regarded by Arminians as a key text which clearly shows Calvinism to be unbiblical and unreasonable. My concern is that, in the attempt to answer Arminian criticism, the Calvinistic response has been to turn to an unconvincing and strained exegesis of the text. The result has been to make the Calvinistic case look weak and has led to unhelpful pastoral consequences. My aim is to give a more convincing and more pastorally helpful explanation of the passage.

The Arminian attack on Calvinism based on Hebrews 6 vs 4-6 is straightforward and can be expressed as:-

- a) The people described in Hebrews 6 vs 4 and 5 are evidently true Christians.
- b) Such people are warned against the real danger of falling away from grace and experiencing the punishment of the wicked.
- c) We cannot suppose that God's word, which is truth itself, would warn people against the danger of falling away when they actually stand in no such danger.
- d) Therefore true Christians can fall away from grace.

It is only fair to point out that the Arminian should not be blind to the obvious weakness in his own case. The Arminian should ask whether he really wants to tell someone that they cannot, "be brought back to repentance". In other words the falling from grace that we are talking about here is total and final and does not fit the Arminian teaching that repentance may be renewed many times if necessary.

Calvinistic Solutions

It is fair to designate these solutions as minimising, in that they each endeavour to discount one of points a) - c) above in order to avoid the conclusion d) and so minimise the apparent force of the passage.

1. **The punishment of the apostate does not mean they experience the fate of the unsaved.** Harry Tait¹ puts forward a full account of this view, pointing out that this solution has the advantage of reading verse 4 naturally, that is as referring to a genuine experience of conversion. He then observes that there is nothing impossible, so experience shows us, in such a man apostasizing. He uses the example of F W Newman, the brother of Cardinal Newman, who spent many years as an apparent apostate before a repentance late in life. His conclusion² is that, "A Christian can sin wilfully after he has received the knowledge of the truth."

Now Tait concedes that Newman is the exception to the rule, which is that an apostate will not find repentance but will die in his apostasy. He asks whether such a man is eternally lost but concludes that he isn't. Firstly, because he concludes from the very important Exodus/Promised Land typology of Hebrews 3 and 4 that this means the apostate Christian is left to ³, "a wilderness life" but that, "He is not cursed. How can he be? The curse was borne for him once and for all by him who became a curse for us (Galatians 3 v 13) but, like the barren field in the author's illustration, he is 'near to being cursed.'" Secondly, he links the phrase (v 8), "In the end it will be burned" to the warning of 1 Corinthians 3 vs 12-15, which leaves us with a sort of protestant purgatory with Christians receiving after death chastisement.

In response it is important to say that the point made on the basis of the typology in Hebrews 3 and 4 is weak. It puts much weight on the significance of the non-return to Egypt which is not referred to at all in the text of Hebrews 3 and 4. This is an unsafe and unsound procedure and the results seem to fly in the face of Hebrews 3 v 14, "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly to the end the confidence that we had at first." Secondly, his linking of the passage to 1 Corinthians 3 vs 12 - 15 is unsatisfactory and fails to relate the passage to its context which is evangelism and the building up of the church ⁴. Finally, the use of Hebrews 6 v 8, "it is near (NIV: in danger of) being cursed" is careless for Tait makes it sound as if near = "close to but not actually there," when actually it means "in danger of, because the next step is burning." There is a progressive parallelism between the phrases, "in danger of being cursed" and, "in the end it will be burned" which indicates that being cursed (an intentionally unusual expression for poor land) = to be burned. It is precisely the curse, borne by Christ for Christians, and the burning of eternal fire which the apostate faces.

2. Apostasy is not actually possible at all. In this interpretation the writer is not talking about a situation that existed or indeed could exist. He is saying, "If it were possible for the believer to fall away, these are the fearful things which would surely befall him. So since these things would be so if you were to give up the faith, see that you stand fast!" This is the approach commended by Hewitt ⁵. "The theory has much in its favour and little against it. It in no way contradicts other passages of Scripture, neither is it in conflict with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints." Tait's comment ⁶ is that, "These are virtues indeed, if of a rather negative sort, and as a way out of the difficulty may commend itself to many readers, particularly if they find the alternative solutions even less acceptable."

This explanation seems to me to be one of the least acceptable and most improbable of them all because it puts into question God's honesty and integrity. As I think parents are wrong when they say "If you get out of bed the bogey man will get you" and so frighten their children with a non-existent danger, will I not feel the same about the Lord if he tries to frighten his children with a non-existent danger? This approach must mean that the readers should realise the danger is not real. In which case what good will be achieved by the warning? Once your children get to a certain age there is no point in warning them about the bogey man!

3. The people spoken of are not true Christians at all. This is the standard Calvinistic response to this passage. It is one which is held by John Calvin, John Owen and John Brown and therefore worthy of very serious consideration. For it to be successful its advocates must be able to show that naturally and reasonably the terminology used would convince us that these people are not actually regenerated and so may experience eternal judgment.

Calvin discusses the description of, "those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of God and the powers of coming age," and then writes, "Now there arises from this a new question, as to how it can be that one who has arrived at this point can afterwards fall away. The Lord calls only the elect effectively, and Paul bears witness (Romans 8 v 14) that those who are led by His Spirit are truly His sons, and he teaches us that it is the sure pledge of his adoption if Christ has made a man a partaker of His Spirit. Moreover the elect are outwith the danger of mortal lapse, for the Father who gave them to Christ the Son to be kept by Him is greater than all, and Christ promises (John 17 v 12) that He will care for them all, so that none perishes."

My answer is that God certainly bestows his Spirit of regeneration only on the elect, and that they are distinguished from the reprobate in the fact that they are re-made in his image, and they receive the earnest of the Spirit in the hope of the inheritance to come, and by the same Spirit the gospel is sealed on their hearts. Calvin is compelled to say that the description of those who, "have shared in the Holy Spirit" is decisive, that they are Christians.

He then goes on to say, "But I do not see that this is any reason why He should not touch the reprobate with a taste of His grace, or illumine their minds with some glimmerings of His light, or affect them with some sense of His goodness, or to some extent engrave His word on their hearts. Otherwise where would be that passing faith which Mark mentions (4 v 17)? Therefore there is some knowledge in the reprobate, which later vanishes away either because it drives its roots less deep than it ought to, or because it is choked and withers away." True though these observations undoubtedly are, this conclusion does not follow logically from his previous exegesis of the passage.

The longest and most exhaustive survey of this passage comes from John Owen. He writes⁹ that to have been, "once enlightened" means, "they are such as were 'illuminated' by the instruction they had received in the doctrine of the gospel, and the impression made thereby on their minds by the Holy Ghost; for this is a common work of his and is here so reckoned."

The second expression, that they have, "tasted of the heavenly gift," Owen explains as meaning¹⁰, "that they have had some experience of the power and efficacy of the Holy Spirit from heaven, in gospel administrations and worship." He here enters upon a discussion which is important for assessing his exegesis of the passage¹⁰, "The expression of *tasting* is metaphorical, and signified no more than to make trial or experiment; for so we do by tasting, naturally and properly, of that which is tendered unto us to eat. We taste such things by the sense given us naturally to discern our food; and then either receive or refuse them, as we find occasion. It doth not, therefore, include eating, much less digestion and turning into nourishment what was so tasted; for its nature being

only thereby discerned it may be refused, yea, though we like its relish and savour, on some other consideration. The persons here described, then, are persons who have to a certain degree understood and relished the revelation of mercy: like stony-ground hearers, they have received the word with transient joy."

The third expression that they, "were made partakers of the Holy Ghost" is explained as being unto *spiritual operations* rather than *personal inhabitation*. Owen¹¹ takes this to be the central point of the description, "this participation of the Holy Ghost is placed, it may be, in the midst of the several parts of this description, as that whereon they do all depend, and they are all instances of it. They were 'partakers of the Holy Ghost,' in that they were 'once enlightened,' and so of the rest." Additionally A W Pink¹² points out that the Greek word here used for "partakers" is not that used in Colossians 1 v 12 and 2 Peter 1 v 4 when real Christians are in view, "The word here simply means 'companions', referring to what is external rather than internal."

The fourth and fifth expressions that they, "have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come" are also explained in a way that relies heavily on the way the metaphor "tasted" is explained above, when speaking of the second expression, "tasted of the heavenly gift." Owen writes¹³, "The apostle as it were studiously keeps himself to this expression, on purpose to manifest that he intendeth not those who by faith do really receive, feed, and live on Jesus Christ, as tendered in the word of the gospel." So to taste the good word of God is to be attracted to it without arriving at sincere obedience to it. To have, "tasted... the powers of the world to come" is to have¹⁴, "had an experience of the glorious and powerful workings of the Holy Spirit in the confirmation of the gospel."

There are several objections to this exegesis and I will mention only those which have a direct reference to Owen's aim to establish¹⁵, "That the person here intended are not *true* and *sincere believers*." Firstly, it is by no means clear that the second, third and fifth expressions all refer to the same thing, namely the external and miraculous operations of the Holy Spirit. If, as Guthrie¹⁶ holds, "The last three (participles) are apparently used to make clear the sense in which the first is used" it clearly could not be so. In addition Philip Hughes, after surveying the history of interpretation of the second clause from Chrysostom to the 20th Century, writes¹⁷, "To 'taste the heavenly gift,' then, may perhaps best be understood as signifying to experience the blessing which God freely and graciously bestows in Christ." In other words it is a far more general expression than Owen wishes to concede.

Secondly; the Greek word translated "to taste," which is crucial in Owen's interpretation of the second, fourth and fifth expressions, does not have the emphasis that Owen wishes to assign to it. He wishes to say that "to taste" is used because it is opposed to the idea of "eating." David Brown¹⁸ describes Owen's comments as, "just and important" but exegetical conscience compels him to add, "whether the words of the apostle were intended to suggest the idea conveyed in it may admit of a doubt." He adds¹⁹ that, "This view of the meaning... is not warranted by the Scripture use of the term." Scriptural evidence is simply that "tasting" is a metaphor for "experiencing" something.

It is significant that the same Greek word is used in Hebrews 2 v 9, "Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels... so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." Hughes writes,²⁰ "In our discussions of 2:9 above, where Christ is said to have tasted death, we noticed that some commentators have wished to give the verb 'tasting' a diminutive connotation, as though our author were saying that Christ only briefly sipped death; so here a few (but, interestingly, not the same) commentators, take 'tasting' to indicate no more than a temporary or superficial participation. The metaphorical use of the verb 'to taste,' however, does not seem to warrant an interpretation along these lines, accurate although this reading of the situation may otherwise be. The two occurrences of the verb in this passage are parallel to the assertion of 1 Peter 2:3, 'you (Christians) have tasted the kindness of the Lord.' Behind such statements is discernible the influence of the invitation of Psalm 34:8, 'O taste and see (that is prove) that the Lord is good,' where no diminished or inadequate experience is implied."

Thirdly; to be, "partakers of the Holy Ghost" does not imply anything external and, in its nature, deceiving. The same word is used in Hebrews 3 v1 of those who, "share in the heavenly calling" and, most significantly, of the incarnation in Hebrews 2 v 14 which reads, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too *shared in their humanity.*" The verbs to which Owen and Pink wish to give a diminished meaning are actually the verbs describing the reality of incarnation and atonement.

This must lead us to accept that the expressions used, and the sense of the passage, are naturally taken by us as referring to true believers and that Owen and those who support him have not proved their case convincingly. Tait²¹ comments on Owen's understanding of the passage, "However we may feel that in order to make the hollow man (the non-genuine professor of faith) fit the words of Hebrews we have to exalt him, as it were, far above the ordinary run of folk in our churches today. Were we preachers to find in our people such response as this man made, such drinking in, such receiving with joy, such enlightenment, to say nothing of participation in the Holy Spirit, would we not feel something akin to revival had come?"

Some Pastoral implications. A central plank of some Calvinistic pulpit ministry has been the type of preaching which aimed to closely distinguish between the experience of true and false, not necessarily consciously hypocritical, professors of religion. It is to this kind of preaching and teaching that the most common Reformed interpretation of this passage lends itself. So we might, when preaching on Hebrews 6 vs 4-6, spend some time minutely diagnosing *the almost Christian* and pointing out how far it is possible to progress without genuine faith and repentance. In practice this results in the attitude, "Oh, I'm sure my original profession of faith was genuine" or, from those of a less optimistic temperament, "I hope I did it right." This will mean that the focus of the passage as we preach it will be the question of assurance and what past experiences may assure us that we have really become Christians. This totally misses the intended pastoral thrust of the passage.

Towards a more consistent solution

1. **Context.** Hebrews was written to deal with a problem located in a Jewish-Christian community. The people involved have been converted and have embraced Christianity. Their temptation, because faced by persecution and propaganda from the Jewish community, is to abandon their Christian faith in favour of a return to Judaism. The writer produces what is basically an exhortation to continue in the faith (13 v 22) which is doctrinal in its approach. Assuming, as he does, a working knowledge of biblical history, the writer uses the categories of salvation in the Old Covenant to highlight the superiority of the New Covenant.

6 vs 4-6 are part of *the warning passage* which extends from 5 v 11 - 6 v 20 and which is the author's reaction to the slowness to learn, indeed the seeming regression, which is displayed by the Hebrew Christians.

We can outline this passage:-

5 v 11 - 6 v 3: **The crucial differences between spiritual babyhood and maturity and the obvious desirability of maturity.** To continue in spiritual immaturity means that both morally and doctrinally we are ignorant and vulnerable (v 14) and unable to be of help to others (v 12). Therefore we should leave the (vs 1-2), "elementary teaching about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement." There has been some discussion of the meaning of these terms and as to whether they represent purely Christian foundations or the foundations for Christianity as found in the Jewish faith. I think no hard and fast line is being drawn here and maturity for a Jewish Christian was precisely to go on to be grounded in those items of faith which are exclusively Christian. F F Bruce writes ², "When we consider the 'rudiments' one by one, it is remarkable how little in the list is distinctive of Christianity, for practically every item could have its place in a fairly orthodox Jewish community. Each of them, indeed, acquires a new significance in a Christian context; but the impression we get is that existing Jewish beliefs and practices were used as a foundation on which to build Christian truth."

6 vs 4-8: **The dangers of continuing spiritual babyhood.** V 3 shows that this very desirable progress to maturity is not inevitable and v 4ff explain why this is. Unhelpfully the connective word *gar* is left untranslated in the NIV and this means that the connection is lost. V 4 should then be translated, "Because (or for) it is impossible. . ." If anyone apostasizes they will not be able to go on to maturity. Vs 7 - 8 are an illustrative parallel in pastoral terms to the spiritual concepts of vs 4-6. God's goodness should lead to blessing but can, if it is abused, lead to cursing and judgement. Notice the use of emotive and theologically significant words in the illustrative parallel - for example, "drinks in the rain often falling on it" (compare Deuteronomy 32 v 2, "Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew"), "cursed" and "burned."

6 vs 9-20: **An exhortation to continued effort in Christian living.** They are encouraged to continuing effort through recollecting past evidence of God's grace in their lives (vs 9-10), through remembering that God has put himself on oath in regard to his covenant faithfulness (vs 13-18), and that our hope rests

in Jesus and hence is already lodged in heaven (vs 19-20).

2. New Testament Diversity. Whilst the natural understanding of the passage is that it describes and is addressed to true Christians, we may still be puzzled at how such warnings can be given. It is important that we take seriously the difference in approach that exists between the various New Testament writers. Geerhardus Vos writes²³, "The peculiarity of the author's conception of religion is that it lies almost entirely in the sphere of consciousness. This may be contrasted with Paul's conception, which represents much of religion as lying *beneath* consciousness. Paul holds up the mystical aspect of union with Christ through the Holy Spirit, something which is wholly lacking in the epistle to the Hebrews. The writer of Hebrews rather regarded only the *phenomenal* (emphasis original) aspect of religion - a point important to remember in connection with the exegesis of the difficult and important passage 6:4-6." Phenomenal aspects of the religion are those directly observable to us - for example: professed faith and repentance is in this category but election is not. In Hebrews we find that salvation is thought of in this same way - as related to observable phenomena. It is assumed to have taken place when faith is expressed; but it is only certain when perseverance in the faith, another observable phenomenon, has actually taken place. This I think is the reason why 3 v 6, "And we are his house if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" and 3 v 14, "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly to the end the confidence we had at first," fit well into the epistle to the Hebrews but would read very strangely in a letter of Paul's. The author's point is not that salvation is earned by perseverance in the faith but that it is evidenced by it. This is very plain in Hebrews 3 v 14, "We have come to share in Christ (the verb is perfect, indicating a past action with present consequences) if we hold firmly (a subjunctive conditional mood of the verb relating to future actions) to the end the confidence we had at first." Now a past event can only be conditional upon future events if we are dealing with phenomena and evidence, rather than underlying causes.

3. Visible Christians. We can safely say that Hebrews 6 vs 4-6 is addressed to visible Christians who are described in terms of the discernible realities of their profession. If we ask the question, "What experience is here being described?", then the answer is Christian conversion. The writer is not trying to convey that there is anything at all suspect about their faith and the expressions used fitly describe the realities of coming to faith in Christ. These Christians, hearing the words, "if they fall away" are being warned against the real danger of falling away from grace and ceasing to be Christians. Calvin²⁴ writes, "The apostle is not talking here about theft, or perjury, or murder, or drunkenness or adultery. He is referring to a complete falling away from the Gospel, not one in which the sinner has offended God in some one part only, but in which he has utterly renounced his grace." The fate of such people when they cease to be Christians is that they will be eternally lost and this is made absolutely clear by the terminology of v 8, "cursed" and "be burned."

The question of whether the people spoken about in Hebrews 6 vs 4-6 are elect or non-elect, regenerate or unregenerate, is simply not part of the concern of the writer at this point. He is addressing God's visible people who stand in

danger of apostasy. Phenomenologically we must all, whether Calvinists or Arminians, admit that Christians apostasize. Whether we wish to make the theological statement that the elect can fall from a state of grace or that someone truly regenerate can do so will depend on our interpretation of other passages, many of which admit of no doubt. Hence the Arminian use of these verses to attack the perseverance of the saints is mistaken.

It is at this point that we are to interact with the concerns derived from our systematic theology and this will mean that we come to the conclusion very close to the views of Owen in his understanding of the phenomena of apostasy. This explains why some writers both approve of the sentiments expressed by him but doubt the soundness of his exegetical base. For example David Brown²⁵ describes Owen's comments on tasting as, "just and important," but exegetical conscience compels him to add, "whether the words of the apostle were intended to suggest the idea conveyed in it may admit of a doubt." Similarly, Philip Hughes²⁶ writes, "The metaphorical use of the verb 'to taste,' however, does not seem to warrant an interpretation along these lines, accurate although this reading of the situation may otherwise be." Hebrews 6 in confronting us with professing Christians apostasizing makes us ask what explains such events. Owen's comment, "The persons here described, then, are persons who have to a certain degree understood and relished the revelation of mercy: like stony-ground hearers, they have received the word with transient joy," makes sense not as an exposition of verses 4 and 5 but as an explanation of the phenomena of v 6.

4. Some Pastoral Considerations. Sensitive Christians cannot read a passage like Hebrews 6 vs 4-6 without concern regarding their salvation. The traditional Reformed understanding has the drawback of turning people's gaze inward and backward in their search for assurance instead of upward and forward where it ought to be located. Our task is not necessarily to analyse the *almost Christian* but to change him. So we are to follow the pattern of the letter to the Hebrews and deal with people on the basis of their professed faith. We are to point them to the obvious desirability of spiritual growth and maturity. We are to warn of the dangers of not progressing and we are to draw them with incentives drawn from God's promises, God's commitment to his oath and so to the cross, and from the person and work of Christ. By God's grace our people will be edified and built up as we honour the meaning and aims of the Holy Spirit in giving us this Scripture.

If these conclusions are correct then we must accept that one of the Christian's motivations is to be fear. Fear of the judgement of God and fear of the God of judgement. It is these that the Lord uses, as the moral and outward means, to preserve his elect in his invincible grace. The pastoral lessons are:-

- a) All of God's visible people are to be warned that if they apostasize they will be eternally lost. This warning is among the moral and outward means by which the elect are enabled to persevere.
- b) We are not to fear damaging the assurance and comfort of true believers when we issue this warning. The writer to the Hebrews actually uses this to turn their eyes from the misdirected search for assurance from past experiences to the promises and oath of God fulfilled in Christ.

- c) Bearing in mind that there will be those with temporary faith in our congregations, we can have good hope that this preaching may be used to bring them to real faith in Christ, rather than resting on past experiences.

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