

## Thoughts From Other Minds:

Unbelief thus naturally leads to disobedience, and disobedience as naturally hardens in unbelief. It is equally true that the great obstacle in the way of a man's believing the gospel, and the most powerful incentive to apostasy from the gospel, is the love of sin. The truth can be kept only in a good and honest heart; it can be held only in pure conscience. Apostates from the truth often flatter themselves that they have yielded to the force of argument; but the just statement of the fact is that given by the prophet – "a deceived heart has turned them aside;" or by the Apostle – they have been "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

The means which the Apostle prescribes for preventing this evil is quite appropriate to its nature. "Exhort one another" says he, "daily while it is called Today." The food of faith is truth and its evidence. All that *man* can do to produce faith, and maintain faith, is just to place these before the mind. It is the duty of every Christian, knowing that there is in him "an evil heart of unbelief" often to turn his own mind to a serious consideration of the truth and its evidence, as contained in the Volume of Inspiration; and it is his duty too, knowing that in every fellow-Christian there is also "an evil heart of unbelief," and especially if he perceive this evil heart manifesting itself in anything like a tendency to apostasy to bring before his mind the truth and its evidence, that he may continue "steadfast and unmoveable," rooted, and grounded, and stablished in the faith wherein he has been taught. This is, I apprehend, the mutual exhortation to which the Apostle refers. ....

The duty of public exhortation forms an important part of the duty of Christian pastors; but it is plain from the passage before us that it is the duty of all Christians, as they have opportunity, privately to exhort and admonish one another lest they "be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." It is too much the practice of professors of Christianity in our times, when they perceive in one of their brethren a tendency, as they think, to "depart from the living God," to speak of it to every person rather than to the one to whom alone in the first instance ought to be spoken of ... instead of endeavouring to remove the evil by friendly exhortation to the individual himself, and earnest prayer to God to render the use of the means prescribed by Himself effectual for the purpose for which He has appointed it.

This mutual exhortation the Apostle enjoins to be engaged in "daily while it is called To-day." ... Whenever we observe in brethren what appears to us an indication of departure from the path of Christian truth and duty we are to use the means prescribed by the inspired writer for bringing them back. Every step they take in the downward path makes their recovery more difficult; and yet a little while, and they will be removed beyond the reach of our exertions. If any of us have a friend whom we think in danger of that greatest of all evils, the loss of the soul, let us be speedy, diligent, earnest, whether by instruction, admonition, or prayer.

John Brown, *Hebrews*, pp. 181-83

## Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Charge

18 September 2016

**Sermon:** "Life in the body # 5 – exhortation, not apostasy "

**Scripture:** Hebrews 3:1-19

### Sermon Notes

**Introduction:** Today we come to two vital areas of our 'body life' - the danger of apostasy, of falling away from faith in the Lord Jesus and eternal life, and the scriptural remedy for this danger, encouragement or exhortation.

In 'the body' we are to love one another as Jesus has loved us; this means humility—pride is divisive and puts God against us; God gives grace to the humble to follow in Christ's 'serving' steps, to through love to serve one another, and grace to use our varied spiritual gifts not for self-promotion but service (1 Peter 4:10).

Who the Hebrews were and who wrote this letter are mysteries; it could have been Paul—but if so he has not named himself as the writer. The Hebrews were Christians, in danger of turning back to Judaism because of persecution.

### 1. The danger—apostasy (falling away)

We are not Hebrews and we are not being persecuted as they were and so we are not tempted to turn from the Christian Faith to Judaism. But we are under pressure from the world, the flesh and the devil, and so we do need to guard against unbelief and falling away from the living God, as they were.

Starting well is important, with a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who died on the cross for sinners—but it is not enough unless we also finish well; many who at one time gave every appearance of believing turn away from the faith they once professed.

This has been a source of contention among Christians since the followers of Jacob Arminius protested against the Reformed teaching of the unconditional security of believers—'once saved always saved'. They said unconditional security needed to be established from the scriptures before they could teach it confidently.

The Reformed response was not 'once saved always saved' but 'the perseverance of the saints' (c.f. WCF 17.1). Many who say 'once saved always saved' say 'saved' equals making a decision for Christ, even if it makes no change to the way they live; 'perseverance' means that believers actively 'persevere' to full salvation.

Whether a person perseveres reveals whether he or she is really converted or not (Heb 3:1). If we are really Christ's household, we will hold fast to our confidence and our boasting in our hope. Before warning of the danger of apostasy, the writer gives an example from the failure of Israel to enter the Promised Land.

The Lord swore in his wrath 'They shall not enter my rest.' (Heb 3:11) - that is, the Land as representing heaven; what was true of them is true of us who have not

yet entered that rest; we are to know we must persevere, and we must guard against the danger of not persevering, lest we show we were never converted.

Our danger is an evil heart, an unbelieving heart that would lead us to fall away from the living God because it does not trust him. The generation that came out of Egypt heard God's word and yet rebelled (Num 13, 14). The people were afraid of the Canaanites and they were unable to enter the land because of their unbelief.

Unbelief in God's promises and disobedience to the Lord will shut us out of heaven (Heb 4:1-2). The good news that came to them was that of entry into the land through faith in the Lord—but it did them no good because they didn't believe what God had said; he promised them rest in the land, but they would not obey.

The good news that has come to us is good news of rest in heaven through faith in the Lord Jesus who made it possible for us to enter that rest because of who he is and what he has done. He is the Son of God (Heb 1:2b-3a); he did what the sacrifices of Judaism could not do; he made purification for sins (Heb 1:3b).

Our sins keep us out of God's rest, out of heaven—but Jesus opened the way for us to enter by making purification for sins by offering himself as the sacrifice (Heb 10:12); his sacrifice secures the forgiveness of sins and the end of sacrifices, for where there is forgiveness there is no longer any need for sacrifices (Heb 4:15-18).

The way we enter that rest is by believing in him, by trusting him as the Son of God and the only sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. By faith alone in him alone we are purified from our sins and have forgiveness; we enter rest, not the shadow rest of an earthly promised land, but the promised land of heaven (4:3, 8-11).

## 2. The remedy—exhortation (encouragement)

Not believing in Jesus, or apostasy from believing in Jesus, is fatal; unbelief kept the Israelites out of Canaan; unbelief will keep us out of heaven—and so we are to take care lest there be in any of us an unbelieving heart to fall away from the living God, for he will judge us by his word (4:12-13).

We who call ourselves Christians are to 'encourage' or 'exhort' one another every day, that no be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. This is for every member of 'the body'; sin is always deceitful—perhaps the writer has in mind especially the steps by which sin leads to apostasy.

Sin would have us believe that we do not need to believe in Christ alone for salvation; that we can keep quiet and avoid ridicule or pity or scorn for our faith; if we believe sin's deceit and sin we are hardened; our spiritual understanding is dulled, leading to loss of faith, disobedience and (without repentance) falling away.

'Exhort' (strong urging by admonition, advice or appeal) is better than encouragement. How might we exhort to God's glory and our blessing? 1. By loving one another deeply; 2. by prayer for wisdom and discernment (Prov 25:11); 3. with scripture; what is needed is not our opinion, but God's word spoken with much love.

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## *My Notes:*

### *Questions for Reflection:*

1. What do we understand about the life situation from the warning passages of this letter? (Heb 2:1-4, 4:12-13, 6:4-8, 10:25-31, 12:25-39). Do these passages teach that it is possible for Christians to 'fall from grace'; if not, why not?
2. Read and reflect on chapter 17 of the Westminster Confession of Faith; why is the expression 'the perseverance of the saints' preferable to the expression 'once saved always saved' as expressing the same truth? (cf. Heb 4:1, 11).
3. What truth is taught be Hebrews 3:6b and 3:14? What is that shuts people out of God's rest, and why? (Heb 3:19-19, 4:2, 6). Who are those who enter God's rest? (4:3).
4. What was the good news that came to Israelites of old? What is the good news that has come to us? (Heb 1:1-3). Why didn't the good news they received benefit them? When does the good news that has come to us benefit us?
5. Why is 'exhort' better than 'encourage'? (see a dictionary for definitions) Why are we to exhort one another? (Heb 3:13-14) How might we go about such a difficult task to God's glory and mutual blessing?