

PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS: A CASE STUDY FROM HEBREWS 6:4-6

AND THE OTHER WARNING PASSAGES OF HEBREWS

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For centuries Christians have been puzzled by Hebrews 6:4-6:

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt.¹

Were these people really saved in the first place? And if they were, does this passage prove that true Christians can lose their salvation? That is the conclusion many Christians have reached while pondering this passage. Others have continued to believe that genuine Christians cannot lose their salvation,² but they have done so only by saying that the cumulative force of passages outside the book of Hebrews is so strong that this difficult passage is not enough to overturn their belief.

¹All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the RSV unless otherwise specified.

I have adopted the commonly accepted sense of the complex syntax of this passage (as reflected, for example in the RSV, NIV, and NASB), although some other formulations have been suggested: see the discussion in William L. Lane, Hebrews 1-8, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), p. 132.

²Some people object to using the phrase "lose their salvation" in discussing Hebrews; I discuss this phrase in section I.A., below.

to hold these verses at bay. Rather, I think that by focusing our attention within the book of Hebrews itself we will see that this passage in its immediate context, and within the larger context of the book of Hebrews as a whole, is entirely consistent with the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

At the end of the article, I will also examine some other warning passages in Hebrews (2:1-4; 3:6-4:13; 10:26-31; 12:25) to compare their teachings with that of 6:4-6.

The plan of this article is as follows:

I. Analysis of Hebrews 6:4-6 in its immediate context

A. Definition of the question

B. The meanings of the descriptive terms in verses 4-6

1. The argument that these people were once saved
2. The argument that the terms alone are inconclusive
3. Other views of 6:4-6
4. Conclusion regarding the positive terms in 6:4-6
5. Why is it impossible to restore such people to repentance?

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D. Verses 9-12: Better things, that is, things that belong to salvation

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F. Comparison with language describing the saved elsewhere in Hebrews

G. Conclusions regarding Hebrews 6:4-6

II. Analysis of other warning passages in Hebrews

- A. Hebrews 2:1-4
- B. Hebrews 3:6-4:13
- C. Hebrews 10:26-31
- D. Hebrews 12:25

III. Comparison with related passages in the rest of the New Testament

IV. Conclusions for the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints

I. Analysis of Hebrews 6:4-6 in its immediate context

A. Definition of the question

It is important at the outset that we define clearly the question that has made this such a disputed passage. The question is a theological one, and for purposes of clarity in discussion I will introduce here some theological concepts on which I think there is broad agreement, even among people who take widely differing positions on the meaning of Hebrews 6:4-6. The precise question under consideration is whether these verses describe people who had experienced the decisive beginning stages of a genuine Christian life, and who then had fallen away and lost their salvation.

But just what do we mean by "the decisive beginning stages of a genuine Christian life"? And what do we mean by "lost their salvation"? No matter what position people take on Hebrews 6:4-6, or on the question of the perseverance of the saints, it will not affect their definition of the beginning of the Christian life, for all theological traditions within evangelical Protestantism (and many others) have agreed that the beginning of the Christian life includes at least the following elements:

1. Regeneration (being "born again")³
2. Conversion (which includes repentance from sins and faith in Christ)⁴
3. Justification (God declares us righteous in his sight)
4. Adoption (God makes us members of his family)
5. The beginning of sanctification (some initial break with actual sin, so that a new pattern of life is begun)

In this list, items 1, 3, and 4 (regeneration, justification, and adoption) are entirely works of God.

³Some would place regeneration before conversion and some after. The order is not important for our argument here, since all would agree that regeneration is an essential element of a genuine beginning to the Christian life.

⁴Some evangelicals deny that repentance is necessary for experiencing justification and the other initial elements of the Christian life mentioned in this list (for example, Lewis Sperry Chafer says, "The New Testament does not impose repentance upon the unsaved as a condition of salvation" (*Systematic Theology*, 7 volumes (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948), Vol. 3, p. 376)). But that difference need not concern us here, since they would agree on the other elements listed, and my general argument in this article will work on the basis of these other elements even if the element of repentance is not included.

However, most evangelicals, including the present author, understand repentance from sins to be an essential part of true conversion, and argue that no one can genuinely trust in Christ as a Savior from his or her sins unless the person has repented of those sins. Therefore, although justification is by faith alone, it is not by faith that is alone -- faith is always accompanied by repentance, and always results in a changed pattern of life. The Westminster Confession of Faith aptly says:

Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love (Chapter 11, par. 2).

Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it (Chapter 15, par. 3).

Item 2 (repentance and faith) is entirely a work of man.⁵ Item 5 (sanctification) is a work in which God and man cooperate (God empowers us to obey, and we obey).⁶

No matter what view people take of Hebrews 6, they will also agree that these five elements come together "as a package" -- that any person who experiences one of these elements will experience all five of them. Therefore it follows that if the people described in Hebrews 6:4-6 have genuinely experienced any one of these elements, we may conclude that they have experienced all of them, and therefore they have experienced the decisive beginning stages of a genuine Christian life.

It will be cumbersome to reproduce this list again and again in subsequent discussion, so, for the purpose of this article, I will use the summary phrase "once saved" (or simply "saved") to refer to people who have experienced these things. I realize that salvation has a past, a present, and a future aspect in New Testament thought: We have been saved (at the time of conversion), we are being saved (sanctification continues as a process throughout our earthly lives, as does God's protection), and we will be saved (we will in the future experience death, bodily resurrection, final rewards, and eternal life with God). However, when I speak of people who were "saved" (in the past), I am referring only to those decisive beginning stages of the Christian life, as defined above.⁷ I will also use the expression "to become a Christian" to refer to the

⁵Although many would argue that God enables us to repent and believe, all would agree that we repent and we believe; God does not repent and believe for us.

⁶Some theologians say that sanctification is entirely a work of God, but this difference is only a matter of definition, since they would define sanctification more narrowly, to include only the internal change of heart which God alone can bring about. This difference in definition will not affect my argument in this article.

⁷Scot McKnight "The Warning Passages in Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions" (*Trinity Journal* 13NS (1992), pp. 21-59, argues (pp. 55-58) that "salvation" (*σῶσις*) in Hebrews is primarily a future concept: for example, Christ "will appear a second

experience of these five initial elements.

In a corresponding way, the phrase "lost their salvation" would mean that all of these past and present elements of salvation have been removed from people's lives: If people have in fact lost their salvation, it would mean that in their own experience they no longer have (2) repentance from sins or faith in Christ, and they no longer have (5) a pattern of increasing sanctification in conduct of life. With respect to divine activity, it would mean that God had withdrawn (1) their regeneration (they are no longer born again, but are once again dead in trespasses and sins), (3) their justification (they no longer have forgiveness of sins), (4) their

time...to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (9:28; cf. 1:14). While I agree that there is a strong future-oriented aspect to salvation in Hebrews (as in the New Testament generally), we must not forget that the author also sees past and present Christian experiences as part of the overall process of salvation. In 2:3, "salvation" is something that is primarily present, since it was proclaimed by the Lord, was manifested in miracles, and is not now to be neglected: "How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?" In other verses, σωτηρια is used to refer to the whole of the Christian experience (past, present, future): Christ is "the pioneer of their salvation" (2:10); he became "the source of eternal salvation" (5:9); the readers at the present time possess "better things...things that accompany salvation" (6:9); "he is able for all time [or: completely] to save (σῶζον) those who draw near to God through him" (7:25). If we add verses that use other terms than σωτηρια and σῶζον, there are dozens of descriptions of past or present aspects of the Christian life in Hebrews (see section I.F., below). (McKnight agrees that it is appropriate to speak of "the present dimensions of salvation that have already been inaugurated and experienced" (p. 58)).

My only concern at this point is to find a brief word or phrase which will summarize the Christian's experience of these decisive beginning stages of a genuine Christian life. The word "salvation" is a broad term that can refer to past, present, or future experiences, or to the whole of the Christian experience (from the point of conversion to enjoyment of the future eternal state), both in contemporary English and in theological studies generally. The Greek term σωτηρια in the New Testament can similarly summarize the whole of the Christian life (John 4:22; Acts 4:12; 13:26, 47; 28:28; Rom. 1:16; Eph 1:13; 2 Tim. 2:10; Jude 1:3; also the verses from Hebrews in the previous paragraph). Therefore, when used with reference to past Christian experience, the terms "saved" and "once saved" seem to me appropriate as summary terms for these decisive beginning stages of the Christian life, especially when they have been defined clearly at the outset of the discussion.

adoption (they are no longer members of God's family), and (5) his internal work of sanctification.

With these definitions in mind, the precise question may now be stated in very brief form:

Does Hebrews 6:4-6 describe people who were once saved but have lost their salvation?

B. The meanings of the descriptive terms in verses 4-6

1. The argument that these people were once saved

If we confine our attention to verses 4-6 alone, a good case can be made for viewing these people as those who were once truly saved.⁸

First, the author says they have "once been enlightened" (Heb. 6:4). One could argue that the word "enlightened" (phōtizō) means "heard and believed the gospel," because in Hebrews 10:32 the author uses the same word to refer to the time when the readers became Christians:

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated (10:32-33).

Even if phōtizō does not always mean "heard and believed the gospel" in other New Testament writers, one could argue that it means that for the author of Hebrews, as this other passage shows. In addition, 2 Corinthians 4 provides a close conceptual parallel: although the verb phōtizō is not used, the cognate noun phōtismos, "illumination, enlightenment" is used twice

⁸This is the view of several interpreters, including Grant R. Osborne, "Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews," in Grace Unlimited, ed. by Clark Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975), pp. 148-153; I. Howard Marshall, Kept by the Power of God (London: Epworth, 1969), pp. 136-141; Lane, Hebrews 1-8, pp. 132-133, 141-142; McKnight, "Warning Passages," 24, 43-48; and Harold W. Attridge, The Epistle to the Hebrews, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), pp. 169-170.

with reference to conversion:

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ....For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4-6).

Moreover, one could argue that in the phrase "have once been enlightened" the word "once" (hapax) indicates a decisive, once-for-all enlightenment that occurs at the beginning of the Christian life. That the word hapax can be used to describe a one-time, never-to-be-repeated event is clear, for example, from its use in Hebrews 9:26-28:

But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.⁹

The text further says that these people "have tasted the heavenly gift" and that they "have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (6:4-5). One can argue that the term "taste" (geuomai) implies a very full and complete experiencing of something, since the author uses the same term in chapter 2 when he¹⁰ speaks of Christ's

⁹Compare also Heb. 10:2: "If the worshipers had once been cleansed, they would no longer have any consciousness of sin."

¹⁰Although the author of Hebrews is anonymous, I have referred to him as "he" throughout

experience of death: "so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one" (Heb. 2:9). Whether "the heavenly gift" means the Holy Spirit (as in Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17) or justification (as in Rom. 5:15, 17), the fact that these people have tasted this gift means that they have truly experienced the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that accompanies salvation (see Rom. 8:9, 11), or that they have truly experienced justification.¹¹

The statement that these people "have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come" may also be taken to indicate that they had truly experienced and taken into themselves the Word of God and the power of God, and therefore that they had experienced salvation.

The text also says that these people "have become partakers of the Holy Spirit" (Heb. 6:4). One could readily argue that the term "partaker" (metochos) indicates a saving participation in the Holy Spirit, just as the same term indicates a saving participation in Christ in Hebrews 3:14:

For we have become partakers (metochos) of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end (NASB).

Finally, the text says "it is impossible to restore again to repentance" people who have

this article, since he identifies himself as a man by use of a masculine participle to refer to himself in the Greek text of 11:32, "time would fail me telling (di̅goumenon)..." A woman would have used the feminine participle di̅goumenon̅n. (Contra S. McKnight, "Warning Passages," p. 24, n. 10, who speaks of the author as "he or she.") Someone might object that this masculine participle is just part of the female author's "camouflage," but this objection is not persuasive, for such deliberate deception would be morally objectionable for any Christian, not least an author of Scripture.

¹¹The actual phrase used in Hebrews 6:4, "the heavenly gift" (ti̅s d̅rea ti̅s epouraniou) does not occur elsewhere in the New Testament. However, the verses just mentioned do use the same word d̅rea ("gift") to refer to the Holy Spirit or to justification.

experienced these things and then have committed apostasy. One could argue that if this is a repentance to which people need to be restored again, then it must be genuine repentance, what the New Testament elsewhere calls "repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18), and what the author of Hebrews calls "a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God" (6:1).

The cumulative force of these terms can also be used as an argument to show that these people were genuine Christians before falling away. Even if someone is not persuaded by any single phrase, the phrases taken together, one could argue, must indicate genuine salvation: the people were enlightened, they repented, they tasted salvation (or the Holy Spirit), they tasted the Word of God and the powers of the age to come, and they became partakers of the Holy Spirit. What more could the author say to indicate a genuine experience of salvation?

2. The argument that the terms alone are inconclusive

A different interpretation of the phrases in Hebrews 6:4-6 is possible, however. Such an interpretation would not argue that the terms show the people described to be unbelievers, for (until the mention of apostasy) there is nothing negative in the description: the terms all indicate positive events that are generally experienced by people who become Christians. But this alternative view would argue that the terms in verses 4-6 by themselves are inconclusive, for they speak of events that are experienced both by genuine Christians and by some people who participate in the fellowship of a church but are never really saved.¹² Therefore (according to

¹²Several elements of this second interpretation, if not its exact formulation, are found in many interpreters conclude (as I do) that the people in 6:4-6 were never really saved. In order to do this, they reason not from the terms in 6:4-6 (which by themselves are inconclusive), but from other evidence in the larger context (whether from verses 7-12, where I find the most persuasive exegetical evidence, or elsewhere). See especially the excellent discussion in John Owen, An Exposition of Hebrews, 7 vols. in 4 (Marshallton, Del.: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1969; reprint of 1855 edition), vol. 3, pp. 68-91. See also Roger Nicole, "Some

this interpretation), when we read about people who

- (1) have once been enlightened,
- (2) have tasted the heavenly gift,
- (3) have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,
- (4) have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come, and
- (5) have repented,

we still cannot know, on the basis of that information alone, if they really have experienced the decisive beginning stages of the Christian life. Whether they truly have become Christians can only be known if we learn other factors -- whether they have trusted in Christ for salvation, for example, and whether God has given them regeneration and forgiven their sins and adopted them into his family, and whether their lives show fruit that gives evidence of true salvation.¹³

Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," in Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation (Festschrift for Merrill Tenney), ed. by Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 355-364; Philip E. Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 206-222; F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, revised edition, NIC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 144-150; Robert A. Peterson, "Apostasy," in Presbyterian 19:1 (spring, 1993), pp. 17-31; Leon Morris, "Hebrews," in The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 12, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 54-56; John Calvin, The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter, trans. by William B. Johnson, ed. by D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 74-77.

¹³It is important to distinguish this position from the view McKnight calls the "phenomenological-false believer view" ("Warning Passages," pp. 23-24), a position I do not hold or argue for. According to McKnight, the "phenomenological-false believer view" argues that the people in 6:4-6 had given outward indications (phenomena) of saving faith but were not really saved: they were "persons who had the signs of faith but did not in fact have genuine faith" (p. 23). This is certainly not my position, for one of the fundamental claims of this article is that the people in 6:4-6 did not have any of the signs of true saving faith (see the following discussion), and the author of Hebrews makes that clear in several ways. (I will argue from 6:7-12 that the people in 6:4-6 were unbelievers, but I do not think there is evidence to say that they

This second interpretation (which is the interpretation supported in this article) would argue that the first view has been premature in reaching the conclusion that the terms must describe genuine saving faith and true regeneration. It would argue, instead, that a closer examination of the terms used will show them to be inconclusive regarding the question of whether they indicate genuine salvation. The positive experiences in 6:4-6, therefore, simply put people in a category well described by D. A. Carson:

Is there NT warrant for thinking that, as far as Christian observers are concerned, some people are not clearly either "in" or "out," that the step of conversion is not always luminously clear?¹⁴

We now turn to such a reexamination of these terms to see if such a position is justified.

a. "Enlightened": It is true that the word ph α tiz ω is used in Hebrews 10:32 to speak of an event that happened near the beginning of the Christian lives of the hearers, but that does not prove that it means "heard and believed the gospel," for the sense "learned about the gospel" would fit just as well:

after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings.¹⁵

In fact, the term ph α tiz ω does not carry a sense of "believed the gospel" or "came to faith" in

were "false believers," that is, people who gave indications of faith but did not have it. Rather, their affiliation with the church and apparent agreement with its teachings meant that one could not tell, until they fell away, whether they were believers or not.)

¹⁴D. A. Carson, "Reflections on Christian Assurance," in WTJ 54 (1992), p. 18 (also p. 000 in this present book).

¹⁵Here the parallel with "receiving the knowledge of the truth" in verse 26 would indicate that receiving knowledge of the gospel is all that the author means (see the fuller discussion of Heb. 10:32 in section I.F., below, pp. 000-000).

any of its other New Testament uses.¹⁶ It occurs eleven times in the New Testament, sometimes just referring to a literal giving of light by a lamp (Luke 11:36), and other times referring to learning in general, not specifically a learning that results in salvation. For example, phōtizō is used in John 1:9 of "enlightening" every man that comes into the world, in 1 Corinthians 4:5 of the enlightening that comes at the final judgment (God will "bring to light the things now hidden in darkness"), and in Ephesians 1:18 of the enlightening that accompanies growth in the Christian life ("having the eyes of your hearts enlightened"). With respect to the noun phōtismos in 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, it is true that Paul here gives an extended metaphor that pictures conversion in terms of seeing the "light" of the gospel. This is, I think, the best argument that phōtizō in Hebrews 6:4 could mean "converted." Yet even in 2 Corinthians 4, it is not the term phōtismos which itself gives the meaning "converted," but the entire metaphor of giving light which Paul has constructed using several different terms (phōs, "light," lamp, "shine," phōtismos, "illumination, light), none of which elsewhere is a technical term meaning conversion.

Therefore, contrary to the assertion of several interpreters, in the New Testament world, phōtizō is not a technical term that means "hear and believe the gospel" or "come to saving faith."¹⁷ It refers to learning and understanding, and therefore the most that can confidently be

¹⁶BAGD, pp. 872-873, define phōtizō as "enlighten, give light to, shed light upon," but give no sense such as "bring to faith" or (in the passive voice) "come to faith, believe" or "be converted" (contra McKnight, "Warning Passages," p. 46, n. 88).

¹⁷McKnight, "Warning Passages," p. 47, says that phōtizō "regularly signifies conversion in early Christian literature," and for support he cites "the full listing of evidence" in Attridge, Hebrews, pp. 169-170, esp. n. 43. Attridge lists 23 references on p. 169, n. 23 (without citing them). His own claim is not exactly that they speak of conversion, but of "the reception of a salvific message" (p. 169), a sense not really incompatible with my own position in this article.

However, when I looked up Attridge's references, I discovered that it is difficult to find any of them that clearly show ph α tiz α even to mean "the reception of a salvific message" (but probably the last one does). None of them use ph α tiz α to mean "come to saving faith," and in eight of the 23 ph α tiz α does not even occur:

Jud. 13:8 (A): Manoah asks God to let the angel come once more "and instruct us what we shall do about the child to be born";

2 Kgs. (LXX 4 Kgs.) 12:2: "Joash did what was right in the sight of the Lord all the days that Jehoiada the priest instructed him";

Ps. 34:5 (LXX 33:5): "Draw near to him, and be enlightened, and your faces will not be ashamed";

Ps. 119:130 (LXX 118:130): "The manifestation of your words will enlighten, and will instruct the simple";

Isa. 60:1: "Be enlightened, be enlightened, O Jerusalem, for your light has come";

Isa. 60:19: "No more shall the rising of the moon give light to your night";

Mic. 7:8: "Do not rejoice against me, my enemy...for though I sit in darkness, the Lord shall give light to me."

1 Enoch 5:8: "Then there will be given to the chosen light and grace";

Dead Sea Scrolls, 1 QS 4:2 (written in Hebrew; ph α tiz α does not occur);

Dead Sea Scrolls, 1 QS 11:2 (written in Hebrew; ph α tiz α does not occur);

Philo, Fug. 139: the ordinance of Scripture "enlightens and sweetens the soul";

1 Cor. 4:5: when the Lord comes he "will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart";

2 Cor. 4:4-6 (ph α tiz α does not occur);

Eph. 1:18: Paul prays that Christians may have "the eyes of your hearts enlightened";

Eph. 3:9: Paul was given grace "to make men see what is the plan of the mystery" [of the Gentile inclusion in the church];

2 Tim. 1:10: Christ "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light";

John 1:9: the Word "enlightens every man who comes into the world";

1 Pet. 2:9 (ph α tiz α does not occur);

2 Pet. 1:10 (ph α tiz α does not occur);

Jas. 1:17: (ph α tiz α does not occur);

1 Clement 36:2: (ph α tiz α does not occur);

1 Clement 59:2: (ph α tiz α does not occur);

Ignatius, To the Romans, (Attridge cites no reference but passim, "throughout"): In actual fact, ph α tiz α occurs only in the inscription of this epistle: "to the Church beloved and enlightened by the will of him who has willed all things which are."

Attridge (p. 169) may have been talking not about ph α tiz α but about the metaphor of "enlightening," but that is inconclusive evidence regarding the meaning of ph α tiz α in Heb. 6:4.

In later Christian literature ph α tiz α was sometimes used as a synonym for baptism (see G. W. H. Lampe, A Patristic Greek Lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), pp. 1508-1509

(II.B.4.c.viii.), but these occurrences are all after the time of the New Testament.

Therefore I must agree with the entry on ph α tiz α in BAGD (pp. 872-873; see previous

claimed for it in Hebrews 6:4 is that it speaks of "those who have heard and understood the gospel."¹⁸ Certainly such intellectual understanding of the facts of the gospel is an important step toward saving faith, but it does not itself constitute the element of personal trust in Christ that is essential to faith.

b. Objection regarding examples of words used outside of Hebrews: At this point someone may object that, in seeking to understand the meaning of phōtizō in Hebrews 6:4 (or any other word in Hebrews 6, for that matter), we should confine ourselves to looking at examples of the same word as used in Hebrews only.¹⁹ And in this case, then, we should look only at phōtizō in Hebrews 10:32 (its only other occurrence in Hebrews) to find evidence for what it means in 6:4. But such an objection is invalid for several reasons:

(1) Greek-speaking people in the 1st century world shared a common stock of words that were understandable by everyone who spoke Greek. This is why, for example, Paul could write an epistle to people he had never visited (the Christians in Rome) and expect that they would understand him. They did not have to acquire some kind of special "Pauline vocabulary" before they could read Romans; they simply had to read the words he wrote, words they already knew.

footnote): there are no examples from the New Testament period where phōtizō signifies conversion.

¹⁸McKnight criticizes Nicole for "moving from what is a possible meaning of an expression ('be enlightened' can perhaps mean simply 'being exposed to something') to a conclusion that such is the meaning here without offering any evidence" ("Warning Passages," p. 49). However, the same can be said of McKnight: he asserts that "enlightened" means "converted," but gives no reason why in the context of Heb. 6:4 it cannot mean "heard and understood the gospel." (Moreover, he gives no examples where it means "converted.") A better approach is to say that the term by itself is inconclusive, and more information from the context is needed to decide the spiritual state of the people.

¹⁹This objection has been raised frequently by seminary students when I have taught on this section of Hebrews, so I include a discussion of it at this point.

This is also why people who could read Hebrews could also read and understand James or Matthew or Philippians, (or the Septuagint, or secular writers such as Diodorus Siculus or Strabo or Polybius) -- the linguistic stock available to be used by these writers was largely the same. Therefore any examples of Greek terms used in any 1st century literature are useful for gaining a sense of the range of meanings that might attach to a word (though those authors closest in time and who share the most social and cultural background are most useful).

(2) When a word can take several senses (as most words can), it is incorrect to assume that the use of a word in one sense by an author precludes him from using that word in other senses elsewhere. For example, Paul uses the word nomos, "law," in several senses.²⁰

(3) Of course, every writer can develop a preference for certain words and certain senses of words, and some words are naturally used more often when writers specialize in a certain subject matter (as with the religious terms and Old Testament terms used by New Testament writers). For this reason, when we have several examples (not just one or two) of one word used in one way by a particular author (for example, dikaion, "justify" in Paul), we may conclude that this is a common sense of the word in that author (but even then we should not claim a sense that is unprecedented, but one which is among the possible senses attested elsewhere). In this way, the meaning attaching to other uses of a word by the same author should be given somewhat

²⁰I used the word "saved" in three senses in section I.A., above, and I am using it in a fourth sense when say that I saved [stored in long term memory] this file on my computer, and in a fifth sense when I say that I saved [did not spend] money by deciding not to buy coffee this morning. Someone could read this article and compile over 30 examples of my use of "saved" to refer to Christian salvation, but that still would not prove that I had to use "saved" to refer to Christian salvation in this footnote, when talking about computer files or money.

greater weight.²¹ But we cannot establish a specialized sense for ph α tiz α in Hebrews in this way, for it is only used one other time in Hebrews, while it occurs nine other times in the rest of the New Testament.

(4) Greek lexicons do not generally define words with reference to unique meanings in each New Testament author. They do not have special sections, for example, for "the meaning of ph α tiz α in Luke," and "the meaning of ph α tiz α in John" and "the meaning of ph α tiz α in Hebrews," but rather list the various meanings ph α tiz α could take in all of 1st century Christian literature, and also in Jewish and pagan literature at the time of the New Testament.

(5) Looking only, or even primarily, at the uses of terms by the same author, would make it impossible to do exegesis even in this passage, which has many terms which occur only once in Hebrews (for example, the terms for "gift," "commit apostasy," "renew," "crucify again," and "hold up to contempt"). Sound exegesis will examine these same Greek terms as they are used in the rest of the New Testament, and in the 1st century generally, to gain information on the possible meanings attaching to them.²²

(6) Looking only at ph α tiz α in Hebrews 10:32 would not change our argument here in

²¹For example, I give somewhat greater weight to the use of kreisson, "better," by the author of Hebrews, in section I.D., below, because thirteen of the nineteen New Testament occurrences are in Hebrews.

²²The examination of occurrences of words outside of Hebrews should be recognized as valid by every interpreter, no matter what his or her position is on Hebrews 6 or on the question of whether Christians can lose their salvation. The question of using meanings of words outside Hebrews is different from the question of using doctrinal conclusions from other New Testament books to influence our decision on 6:4-6. As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, my goal in this article is first to construct an exegetical argument from the teaching material within Hebrews alone, before comparing it with other New Testament material. My purpose in this is to enable the arguments here to be considered fairly by people who approach the text with widely differing theological convictions on whether Christians can lose their salvation.

any significant way, for the sense "heard and understood the gospel" fits just as well there.²³

c. "Once": It is simply incorrect to claim that the term hapax ("once") must indicate an event that happens once for all time and can never be repeated.²⁴ Hapax is used, for example, in Hebrews 9:7 to speak of the fact that the high priest enters into the Holy of Holies "once a year" - an event that was repeated year after year. In Philippians 4:16 Paul uses hapax to say that the Philippians had sent him a gift "once and again" -- the event was repeated when they sent the second gift. In places where hapax does refer to something that can never be repeated (for example, Heb. 9:26-28), that idea is derived from other indications in the context, not from any sense inherent in this word itself. Therefore, this word does not in itself mean that something happened "once for all time" and can never be repeated, but simply that it happened "once," without specifying whether it will be repeated or not.²⁵

d. "Tasted": Inherent in the idea of geuomai when it means "taste" are two factors: (1) the tasting is temporary, and (2) a more permanent experience of the thing tasted might or might not follow.²⁶ With regard to literal tasting of food or drink, for example, geuomai is used in Matthew 27:34 to say that those crucifying Jesus "offered him wine to drink, mingled with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it" (cf. John 2:9).

²³See further discussion of Heb. 10:32 below, pp. 000-000.

²⁴Lane is representative of many commentators when he says that hapax "conveys the notion of definitive occurrence" (Hebrews, p. 141), but this is not borne out by an examination of the actual use of the word.

²⁵This is not the same word as ephapax, which is more regularly used in the New Testament of non-repeatable events (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10; cf. BAGD, p. 330, 2).

²⁶It does not seem to me that the discussions in the commentaries about whether tasting involves a partial or full experience of the thing tasted really address the point at issue. The common factor in all instances of tasting is that the tasting is a temporary experience, not a continuing one, and it sometimes (or often) results in no permanent change in the person doing the tasting. The author clearly does not say the people were transformed by the heavenly gift or

This is also true when geuomai is used in the figurative sense of "come to know something." (BAGD, p. 157, 2). For example, a very good parallel to Heb. 6:4-6 is found in Josephus, The Jewish War, 2.158, who speaks about the theological views of the Essenes "whereby they irresistibly attract all who have once tasted (tois hapax geusamenois) their philosophy." Here Josephus makes it clear that those who have "once tasted" have not yet made the Essene philosophy their own, but are simply very strongly attracted to it. By analogy, in Hebrews 6 those who have "tasted" the heavenly gift and the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come may be strongly attracted to these things, or they may not be, but mere tasting does not mean that they have made these things their own possession.²⁷

Those who hold the first interpretation may object that geuomai has a stronger sense than this: the example of Jesus tasting death in Heb. 2:9 shows that tasting is "genuinely experiencing" the thing tasted, for Jesus really died. In response, I can agree that a "real experience" of the thing tasted is in view not only in Hebrews 2:9 but also in every example of geuomai mentioned (a real experience of wine, of Essene philosophy, of freedom, or of military conflict). Similarly, in Hebrews 6:4-6 the people had a genuine experience of the heavenly gift and the word of God and the powers of the age to come. But that is not the point. The question is whether they had a saving experience of these things, whether the experience was one that brought regeneration, saving faith, justification, etc.

made alive by the word of God, or some other similar expression. They tasted these things.

²⁷BAGD, p. 157, 2, give other examples of geuomai in this sense, such as Herodotus 6.5, where the people of Miletus had "tasted of freedom," but it was certainly not their own possession. They also cite Dio Chrysostom, 32.72, where he speaks of the people of Alexandria in a time when they "had a taste of warfare" in an encounter with Roman troops who were simply harassing them and not actually engaging in genuine war.

Of course, if it could be shown that "the heavenly gift" was salvation, then a "real experience" of salvation would have to be understood as the beginning of the Christian life. But the exact phrase hō dōrea tōs epouraniou ("the heavenly gift") occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, so it would be impossible to prove from other examples that "the heavenly gift" means salvation. In fact, the word dōrea by itself does refer to the Holy Spirit elsewhere (Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17), and the Holy Spirit has been sent from heaven (Acts 2:33; 1 Pet. 1:12), so it is likely that Hebrews 6:4 means that those who "tasted the heavenly gift" had some experience of the power of the Holy Spirit -- perhaps in convicting them of sin (cf. John 16:8), perhaps in casting a demon out of them (cf. Matt. 12:28), or perhaps in receiving some kind of healing (cf. Luke 4:14, 40; 1 Cor. 12:9).²⁸ But such experiences of the Holy Spirit do not themselves indicate salvation, for it is possible to "resist the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51), and even, for those who are under conviction from the Holy Spirit, to resist so strongly that one commits "blasphemy against the Spirit" (Matt. 12:31).

The other things tasted can be understood similarly. To taste "the goodness of the word of God" is to come to know and even feel something of its truthfulness and power. But this is not the same as believing it for eternal life. To taste "the powers of the age to come" probably means to feel something of the new covenant power of the Holy Spirit in conviction of sin, having demons cast out, experiencing healing, etc. (see verses listed above). Such tasting of "the powers of the age to come" may even mean to preach the gospel so that people are saved (cf.

²⁸The fact that the Holy Spirit is mentioned directly in the following phrase does not prevent "the heavenly gift" from meaning the Holy Spirit, or the working of the Holy Spirit, for the author could simply be varying his method of expression while repeating similar ideas for emphasis.

Phil. 1:15-18: some preach from wrong motives), or to prophesy and work miracles and cast out demons in Christ's name (Matt. 7:22-23). But these experiences do not necessarily indicate that the person is saved (Jesus says, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers," Matt. 7:23).²⁹

Here also the nature of "tasting" is relevant. As we noted above, the New Testament examples of tasting show that (1) the tasting is temporary, and (2) a more permanent experience of the thing tasted might or might not follow. In these verses, this means that the tasting of the heavenly gift, and the word of God, and the coming powers, was temporary, and we cannot tell from the mere fact of such tasting if a more permanent experience of these things followed or not.

e. "Partakers of the Holy Spirit": In the phrase "have become partakers of the Holy Spirit," the first question is the exact meaning of the word metochos, "partaker." It is not always clear to English-speaking readers that this term has a range of meaning and may imply very close participation and attachment, or may only imply a loose association with the other person or persons named.

For example, to become "partakers (metochoi) of Christ" (literal translation of Heb. 3:14) is to have a saving participation in the salvation he brings. On the other hand, metochos can also

²⁹One more consideration may be mentioned here, even though it applies to each of the positive terms in 6:4-6. If the author had wanted to emphasize the continuing results of the tasting (or enlightening, or partaking), he could easily have done so with the use of perfect participles, but he used aorist participles instead for all of these experiences, thereby indicating only that the enlightening, tasting, and partaking happened, without signifying anything about continuing results from any of these events. This does not, of course, prove that the effects lasted only a short time, but only that the author did not specify continuing results when he could easily have done so.

be used in a looser sense, simply to refer to associates or companions. We read that when the disciples took in a great catch of fish so that their nets were breaking, "they beckoned to their partners (metochoi) in the other boat to come and help them" (Luke 5:7). Here it simply refers to those who were companions or partners with Peter and the other disciples in their fishing work. Hebrews 1:9 (quoting Ps. 45:7) also uses metochos to speak of "comrades" (RSV) or "companions" (NIV, NASB): "God, your God, has set you above your companions" (NIV). Ephesians 5:7 uses a closely related word (summetochos, a compound of metochos) when Paul warns Christians about the sinful acts of unbelievers and says, "do not associate (literally, do not be partners) with them" (Eph. 5:7). So the term metochos commonly means someone who shares or participates in something with someone else.³⁰

Now what does it mean to become a "partaker" (or sharer) in the Holy Spirit? It cannot mean that people are given a share of the very being of the Holy Spirit, because, as God, the Holy Spirit cannot be divided into parts and cannot give away any share of his being, and because the term metochos never means "to have a share of the being of another person." Therefore to become a "partaker" of the Holy Spirit means to be associated in some way with the work of the Holy Spirit and to share in some of the benefits the Holy Spirit gives. Sometimes interpreters assume that the phrase means "to receive the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit,"

³⁰Some instances of metochos from the Septuagint also provide examples where it only refers to companionship, not to any kind of regenerating or life-changing experience with God or with the Holy Spirit. For instance, in 1 Kgs. 20:30, Saul accuses Jonathan of being a "partner" with David. In Ps. 119:63, the psalmist says he is a "companion" of all those who fear God. Eccl. 4:10 says that two are better than one, for if they fall, the one will lift up his "partner." Prov. 28:24, in the translations of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotian, uses this word to say that a man who rejects his father or mother is a "companion" of ungodly men.

BAGD define metochos as (1) (as adjective) "sharing or participating in," or (2) (as substantive) "partner, companion" (p. 514).

and such a sense is possible. But on the other hand there is nothing in the text that would require that meaning. The phrase may mean simply that these people had come into the church and there had experienced some of the benefits of the Holy Spirit in answers to prayer or even in using some spiritual gifts. To put the matter simply, they were partakers of some of the benefits which the Holy Spirit gives.³¹

The example of the fishing companions in Luke 5:7 provides a good analogy: Peter and the disciples could be associated with those companions and to some degree influenced by them and even gain some benefits from them without having a thoroughgoing change of life caused by that association. Another close analogy is found in Ignatius, To the Ephesians (ca. 110 A.D.) 11:2, in which he writes from prison and expresses thanks for the prayers of the Ephesians, "in which may I always be a sharer (metochos)" -- he wanted always to benefit from their prayers. So the word metochos allows for a range of influence from fairly weak to fairly strong, for it only means "one who participates with or shares with or accompanies in some activity." Therefore the people spoken of in Hebrews 6 had been associated with the church and as such had been associated with the work of the Holy Spirit, and no doubt influenced by him in some ways (whether weak or strong) in their lives, but we cannot with confidence say more than that.

³¹Someone may object that it seems strange to say that becoming a "partaker of Christ" (3:14) means to become a Christian but becoming a "partaker of the Holy Spirit" (6:4) does not. But I think the question is resolved when we realize that metochos does not in itself mean anything so specific as "partook of saving benefits from (someone)," but only "partook of some influence or benefit from (someone)." The exact kind of benefit or influence is determined by each circumstance and association. With respect to Christ, his primary role with respect to the world today is to bring salvation to people, and becoming a "partaker of Christ" would naturally be understood to mean becoming a Christian. But with respect to the Holy Spirit, he has several roles in the world today, among them distributing of spiritual gifts, convicting of sin, and empowering for ministry, as well as causing regeneration. Therefore to become a "partaker of the Holy Spirit" would naturally be understood by the readers to mean partaking in some of the

f. "Repentance": Since the author implies that it would be desirable to "restore again to repentance" these people once they fall away, the repentance which they once had must be some kind of sorrow for sins committed. This is an important step in coming to Christ, for until people see their own sinfulness, they will see no need to have faith that Jesus will forgive their own personal sins. Therefore repentance from sins must precede or accompany all genuine saving faith.³² But repentance is not itself saving faith. In this very paragraph, the author distinguishes "repentance from dead works" from "faith toward God" (v. 1), showing that there is a distinction between them.³³

Moreover, it is possible to have a kind of repentance that falls short of saving repentance, a repentance that is not accompanied by saving faith. For example, Hebrews 12:17 uses metanoia to speak of the change of mind that Esau sought concerning the sale of his birthright. This would not have been a repentance that brought him to salvation, but simply an undoing of the transaction regarding his birthright.³⁴ Another example of repentance that is not saving repentance is found in the conduct of Judas:

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that he was condemned, he repented³⁵ and brought

benefits that he gives, not all of which include salvation.

³²See footnote 00 above.

³³Repentance and faith are also connected but distinguished in Mark 1:15 ("repent, and believe in the gospel"); Acts 19:4; 20:21; compare also Acts 26:20 ("repent and turn to God").

³⁴The verb "to repent" (Greek metanoēō, cognate to metanoia) is sometimes used to refer not to saving repentance but just to sorrow for individual offenses, as in Luke 17:3-4: "if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." This is not repentance unto salvation but simply regret for wrongs done.

³⁵The verb here is not the noun metanoia or the cognate verb metanoēō but metamelomai, another term used for repentance in the New Testament. The ideas of changing one's mind and feeling regret for past actions are present in both words.

back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders (Matt. 27:3).

Judas "repented," but he did not have saving faith (see John 6:70-71; 13:27; Acts 1:16-20; Matt. 27:5). When Paul says that "godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation" (2 Cor. 7:10), this suggests at least that there can be a repentance that does not lead to salvation. We conclude that "repentance" means a sorrow for actions that have been done or for sins that have been committed, and a resolve to forsake those sins. But not all repentance includes an inward, heartfelt repentance toward God that accompanies saving faith.

Whether or not repentance is a genuine saving repentance, a "repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18), may not always be evident right away. Another good parallel is seen in the false teachers described in 2 Peter 2:20-22: They had "escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (v. 20), which indicates that there had been both knowledge of the gospel and repentance (they had escaped the defilements of the world). But then they had turned back to their previous ways. Moreover, they had never really been saved, for Peter says, "It has happened to them according to the true proverb, The dog turns back to his own vomit, and the sow is washed only to wallow in the mire" (v.22) -- in other words, the repentance was only an outward cleansing, and did not change their true nature.

In fact, the idea that there can be a non-saving kind of repentance is parallel to the idea that there can be a non-saving kind of faith. There is a kind of intellectual "belief" that involves knowledge and approval, but not personal trust (see, for example, the "belief" of Nicodemus, Agrippa, and demons in John 3:2; Acts 26:27-28; Jas. 2:19; compare also 1 Cor. 15:2; 1 Tim. 1:19).

But, someone may object, if the repentance mentioned in Hebrews 6:4-6 is not genuine

saving repentance, why would the author think it desirable to "restore" people to such repentance? The answer is that the author is not concerned -- or able -- to specify whether the "repentance" he describes in verses 4-6 had led to salvation or not. That is because the real nature of repentance is not always evident from outward observation. The author is simply saying that if someone has a sorrow for sin and a decision to forsake that sin, and then comes to understand the gospel and experience various blessings of the Holy Spirit's work (no doubt in fellowship with the church), and then turns away, it will not be possible to restore such a person again to a place of sorrow for sin -- there will be a hardness of heart incompatible with repentance.³⁶ But none of this implies that the original repentance had necessarily led to saving faith and a forgiveness of sins. That is simply not specified, and we cannot therefore draw a conclusion on the basis of the term "repentance" itself.

3. Other views of 6:4-6

Three other less common views can be mentioned here. (1) The community view: V. D. Verbrugge proposes that 6:4-6 speaks not of individual people at all, but of a Christian community that is danger of falling away.³⁷ Most interpreters mention this proposal as interesting, but few have been persuaded by it. McKnight rightly objects that both the warnings (3:12; 4:1; 10:28-29) and the exhortations to persevere (11:1-40 gives many positive models) assume that the author is concerned with individual apostasy, and also that Verbrugge's argument for Isa. 5:1-7 as the background to 6:7-8 is not convincing.³⁸ Furthermore, verses 7-8 picture

³⁶Leon Morris understands a reference to a specific kind of repentance, "a repentance that means leaving the backsliding into which the person has fallen" ("Hebrews," p. 55).

³⁷V. D. Verbrugge, "Towards a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6," Calvin Theological Journal 15 (1980), pp. 61-73.

³⁸McKnight, "Warning Passages," p. 54.

land that is completely blessed or completely cursed, an idea suitable to a picture of individual believers, but incompatible with either possibility Verbrugge foresees (communal faithfulness with some apostates present, or communal apostasy with some faithful believers present). Finally, the enlightening, tasting, partaking, and repenting, are best understood as individual experiences that precede saving faith, and there is nothing in the context that would let the readers know that the author intends to be speaking of a community here.

(2) The Christian maturity view: Thomas Oberholtzer argues that the warning is addressed to true Christians, but says that the warning is not against apostasy but against failing to press on to maturity in the Christian life. Therefore the judgments that would follow are only loss of reward, not loss of salvation.³⁹ However, Oberholtzer's argument fails to be persuasive for the following reasons: (1) He says the metaphor of fiery judgment in v. 8 refers only to loss of reward, not eternal condemnation, because the thorns are burned, not the ground (p. 326). But this overlooks the feminine singular relative pronoun h³⁹s (v. 8), which must refer to the ground (g³⁹), not the plural "thorns and thistles." The final end of the ground is "to be burned," which surely signifies not loss of reward but eternal condemnation. (2) His translation of verse 9, "better things that accompany salvation" (p. 327; he follows the RSV), fails to account for the epexegetical kai in that phrase, and therefore fails to take account of the fact that the "better

³⁹Thomas K. Oberholtzer, "The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4-12," Bibliotheca Sacra 145:579 (July-Sept., 1988), pp. 319-328. At several crucial points in his argument Oberholtzer cites Zane C. Hodges, "Hebrews," in The Bible Knowledge Commentary, ed John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983), pp. 794-796, whose position Oberholtzer follows quite closely. (The entire position is compatible with Hodges' view that saving faith need not be the kind of faith that results in a changed life; therefore, the people in 6:4-6 were truly saved (though they were immature); and even though they do not now press on to maturity, and even though they bear no good fruit (vs. 8), they will still be saved eternally and

things" are better precisely because they accompany salvation. This means that the people in 6:4-6 do not have salvation, contrary to Oberholtzer's contention.⁴⁰ (3) He incorrectly minimizes the sense of adunatos, "impossible," in verse 4, saying that it means that those who fail to press on to maturity also fall away from "worship participation in God's house" and thereby put themselves "beyond encouragement by others in the community" (p. 323). But adunatos has a much stronger sense than this: Oberholtzer's view essentially makes it mean "difficult" or "unlikely."⁴¹ In addition, it is simply not true that it is impossible to restore to repentance Christians who at one point in their lives fail to press on to maturity -- this would be a new doctrine of "grow now or remain immature forever," which the Bible nowhere teaches. (4) Oberholtzer incorrectly minimizes the seriousness of the sin in verse 6: "they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt." This is a public repudiation and mockery of Christ⁴² characteristic only of hardhearted unbelievers; it is not simply a failure to press on to Christian maturity. (5) His argument that the context is one of encouraging the readers to press on to maturity (5:11-6:3) is correct, but that fact (recognized by all interpreters) does not require his understanding of 6:4-6. Several solutions have been proposed, and one definite possibility is to see this progression of thought:

Let us go on to maturity (5:11-6:3),

for it is impossible to restore church attenders whose spiritual status is unclear,
and who do not go on but fall away (6:4-8),

and even you who are clearly saved need to persevere earnestly (6:9-12).

only experience a loss of reward.)

⁴⁰See the full discussion of this verse in section I.D., below.

⁴¹See section I.B.5., below, for a discussion of adunatos.

(3) The hypothetical view: Thomas Hewitt adopts a "hypothetical" view of these verses, that is, that the writer is telling what would happen if a true Christian could ever fall away, even though in fact that could never happen: "the writer is dealing with supposition and not with fact, so that he may correct wrong ideas."⁴³ But surely it would be useless to warn the readers against something that could never happen, and that without telling them that it could never happen. Nicole says, "When there is an insuperable barrier there is no need to give warning concerning dangers on the other side!"⁴⁴

Each of these three alternative views, then, deserves mention, but none of them has enough evidence to be persuasive.

4. Conclusion regarding the positive terms in Hebrews 6:4-6

At this point we may ask what kind of person is described by all of these terms. On the basis of the terms alone, a reasonable argument can be made that these were genuine Christians before they fell away (section I.B.1., above). On the other hand, the foregoing discussion has shown that all of the terms can be used to describe either Christians or non-Christians who affiliate closely with the activities of a church. Therefore, on the question of whether these people were really saved before they fell away, our decision must be that the terms by themselves are inconclusive. If any other decision is to be reached, it will have to be on the basis of other factors found in the context of the passage.⁴⁵

⁴²See the extensive discussion of this sin in McKnight, "Warning Passages," pp. 36-43.

⁴³Thomas Hewitt, The Epistle to the Hebrews, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), pp. 110-111.

⁴⁴Nicole, "Some Comments," p. 356.

⁴⁵Someone may object that, though the terms in 6:4-6 sometimes have non-salvation meanings, these meanings are less common and therefore less likely, and at this point we should simply ask what meaning for the terms is most likely, and use that understanding in our exegesis.

What then has happened to these people? They are at least people who have been affiliated closely with the fellowship of the church. They have had some sorrow for sin and a decision to forsake their sin (repentance). They have clearly understood the gospel and given some assent to it (they have been enlightened). They have come to appreciate the attractiveness of the Christian life and the change that comes about in people's lives because of becoming a Christian, and they have probably had answers to prayer in their own lives and felt the power of the Holy Spirit at work, perhaps even using some spiritual gifts (they have become "associated with" the work of the Holy Spirit or have become "partakers" of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the heavenly gift and the powers of the age to come). They have been exposed to the true preaching of the Word and have appreciated much of its teachings (they have tasted the goodness of the Word of God).

These factors are all positive, and people who have experienced these things may be genuine Christians. But these factors alone are not enough to give conclusive evidence of any of the decisive beginning stages of the Christian life (regeneration, saving faith and repentance unto life, justification, adoption, initial sanctification). In fact, these experiences are all preliminary to those decisive beginning stages of the Christian life. The actual spiritual status of those who have experienced these things is still unclear.

(McKnight, for example, says, "If one used these descriptions neutrally most Christian congregations would unanimously think that regenerate Christians were in view" (p. 48, n.104).)

But this objection misunderstands the nature of exegesis. When dealing with terms that have a range of meanings, no responsible exegete will say that one meaning is "more likely" until he has examined the context in which a term occurs. Words derive their specific sense (within a possible range) from the context, and, among the possible meanings (those that have been attested elsewhere), there is no such thing as a "more likely" meaning for a term apart from its context. (In this case, the most relevant context includes the author's continuation of this discussion in verses 7-12.)

5. Why it is impossible to restore such people to repentance

In spite of all these positive experiences, "if⁴⁶ they then commit apostasy"⁴⁷ and "crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt" (Heb. 6:6), they are willfully rejecting these blessings and turning decidedly against them. The sin in view involves determined rejection of Christ and probably public ridicule of him: they "crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt" (v. 6).⁴⁸

If this happens, the author says it will be impossible⁴⁹ to restore them again to any kind of repentance or sorrow for sin. This is probably because their hearts will be hardened and their consciences calloused. What more could be done to bring them to salvation? If someone tells them Scripture is true they will say that they know it but they have decided to reject it. If

⁴⁶Grammatically it is possible to translate the participle parapesontas in v. 6 temporally rather than causally: "It is impossible to restore" them "while they are crucifying the Son of God on their own account..." But the sense "because" is much better: "To say that they cannot be brought to repentance so long as they persist in their renunciation of Christ would be a truism hardly worth putting into words" (Bruce, Hebrews, p. 149).

⁴⁷The RSV translation "commit apostasy" is a bit too specific for the word parapiptō, which simply means "to fall beside, go astray, miss," or "to become lost" (BAGD, p. 621); compare the NASB ("have fallen away") and NIV ("fall away"). However, the context does indicate that the falling away is so serious it could be rightly called "apostasy" (see next footnote).

⁴⁸Scot McKnight says the sin is apostasy in the specific sense of "a willful rejection of God and his Son, Jesus the Messiah, and open denunciation of God and his ethical standards" ("Warning Passages," p. 39). McKnight's "synthetic perspective" is helpful in that it gives more insight into the nature of the falling away which the author warns against in several places (pp. 36-43), and he rightly points out several textual indicators that support the idea that the same or a similar sin of apostasy is in view in the passages he examines (though I do not think that is the only sin the author warns against, either in these passages or in the rest of the epistle).

⁴⁹The author does not say whether he means it is impossible for God (adunatos has this sense in Heb. 6:18 and 10:4) or simply impossible for men but possible for God (adunatos has this sense in Matt. 19:26; Mark 10:27; Luke 18:27). It really does not matter which is intended, for the author's point is that the readers should not expect such renewal to repentance to happen: it is not within the range of God's ordinary ways of working with man. McKnight understands "impossible" to mean, "God will not work in them any longer so it is impossible for them to be restored" (p. 33, n. 39).

someone tells them God answers prayer and changes lives they will respond that they have experienced that as well, but they want nothing of it. If someone tells them that the Holy Spirit is powerful to work in people's lives and the gift of eternal life is good beyond description, they will say that they understand that, but they want nothing of it. If someone tells them repentance from sins will lead to a better life, they will say that they know that but they do not want that kind of better life. Their repeated familiarity with the things of God and their experience of many influences of the Holy Spirit has simply served to harden them against conversion.

F. F. Bruce reaches a similar conclusion:

In these verses he is not questioning the perseverance of the saints; we might say that rather he is insisting that those who persevere are the true saints. But in fact he is stating a practical truth that has verified itself repeatedly in the experience of the church. Those who have shared the covenant privileges of the people of God, and then deliberately renounce them, are the most difficult persons of all to reclaim for the faith.⁵⁰

The author knows that there are some in the community to which he writes who are in danger of falling away in just this way (see 2:3; 3:8, 12, 14-15; 4:1, 7, 11; 10:26, 29, 35-36, 38-39; 12:3, 15-17). He wants to warn them that, though they have participated in the fellowship of the church and experienced a number of God's blessings in their lives, yet if they fall away after all that, they will not be saved. This does not necessarily imply that he thinks that true Christians could fall away, for he is especially writing to warn those whose spiritual status is not yet clear.

C. Verses 7-8: The metaphor of the field

⁵⁰Bruce, Hebrews, p. 144.

Verses 7-8 are connected to verses 4-6 with gar ("for, because"), indicating that the author is providing a reason or an explanation to support what he has said in verses 4-6:

For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.

Since the author intends this metaphor as an explanation of verses 4-6, the frequent rain best corresponds to the blessings that came from God into the lives of these people: the enlightening, the tasting of the heavenly gift and the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and the partaking in the work of the Holy Spirit. But the parallel with rain is revealing, for rain falls on all kinds of ground, and when the ground is still bare, one cannot tell what kind of vegetation will appear as a result of the rain. If the rain falls on ground that responds positively ("brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated"), then it "receives a blessing from God" (v. 7). But the same rain (in terms of the metaphor, the same events of being enlightened, tasting, and partaking) can fall on unresponsive ground, ground that only brings forth thorns and thistles. The difference was not in the kinds of events experienced but in the kinds of ground the rain fell on. The way the ground responds to the rain reveals the kind of ground it was in the first place.⁵¹

Therefore this metaphor provides significant help in solving the puzzle of verses 4-6. The phrase "if it bears thorns and thistles" in verse 8 corresponds directly to "if they then commit

⁵¹Though grammatically the same word "ground" (gē) is referred to in verses 7 and 8, the "but" (de) and the conditional sense of the participle in v. 8 (but if it bears thorns and thistles...) show that the author is not thinking of the same piece of land at all, for he clearly thinks of two

apostasy" in verse 6. When the land bears thorns and thistles, "it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end it to be burned" (v. 8). In sharp contrast to the "blessing from God" on the fruitful land in verse 7, these consequences (being cursed and burned) are a picture of final judgment from God. Moreover, it is not just the thorns and thistles which are burned up (which might fit a picture of loss of reward for a Christian who is finally saved), but the land itself.⁵² In this sense, these people who fall away are like land that bears thorns and thistles -- the final state (the telos, "end") of both is cursing and a fiery judgment.

Was the land that received much rain good land or bad when it began to receive the rain? Before it bore a crop its status was uncertain, because no vegetation had appeared. But once the thorns appeared, they revealed the true nature of the land -- it had been bad land all along. In exactly the same way, were the people in verses 4-6 truly saved when they were enlightened, and tasted, and partook of the Holy Spirit? At that point their status was uncertain because these experiences were all things they had received, but these experiences did not yet give any indication of their response, of the kind of fruit they would bear, whether good or bad.⁵³ But once they fell away and held Christ up to contempt, this bad fruit in a similar way revealed what

distinct possibilities for two very different kinds of ground.

⁵²In v. 8, the singular adjective adokimos ("worthless") and the singular relative pronoun hōs ("of which") cannot refer to the plural nouns akanthas and tribolous ("thorns and thistles"), but must both refer to the singular noun gē ("land"), which is understood but not repeated in v. 8 as the noun modified by the participle ekpherousa ("bearing").

⁵³It is true that repentance was a kind of response, but, as explained above, an individual experience of repentance may or may not be the life-changing kind of repentance that accompanies saving faith. It is also significant that the author's syntax treats "repentance" differently from the other five elements, all of which are expressed by a series of aorist participles, and all of which are the blessings which the author is emphasizing and basing his argument on (they are the things that have been received as the ground receives rain).

their true status was all along: they had never truly been saved in the first place.⁵⁴

Now someone may object that another understanding of the metaphor is possible: perhaps those who fell away only became like land that bore thorns after they fell away; perhaps they were like good land (they were "saved") before they fell away. But the author's language is not consistent with this interpretation: (1) There is no indication of good fruit-bearing before falling away, so this view is simply speculation with no data to support it. (2) The author uses present participles to indicate a continuous process of bearing which we could paraphrase as follows:

"having drunk and continuing to bear" (piouosa ... kai tiktousa) useful vegetation (v.7), or

"having drunk and continuing to bear" (ekpherousa) thorns and thistles (v.8).⁵⁵

The idea of land that once bore good fruit and now bears thorns is not compatible with this picture.

The implication is this: While the positive experiences listed in verses 4-6 do not provide us enough information to know whether the people were truly saved or not, the committing of apostasy and holding Christ up to contempt do reveal the true nature of those who fall away: all along they have been like bad ground that can only bear bad fruit. If the metaphor of the thorn-bearing land explains verses 4-6 (as it surely does), then their falling away shows that they were never saved in the first place.

D. Verse 9-12: Better things, that is, things that belong to salvation

⁵⁴The author's metaphor here is consistent with other metaphors in Scripture where good fruit is a sign of true spiritual life and fruitlessness or bad fruit is a sign given by unbelievers (for example, Matt. 3:8-10; 7:15-20; 12:33-35).

Though the author has been speaking harshly about the possibility of falling away, in verse 9 he returns to speak to the most common situation among his readers, most of whom he thinks to be genuine Christians (he now speaks of them as "you").⁵⁶ He says,

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case--things that accompany salvation (NIV).

We may also translate the last phrase, "things that belong to salvation."⁵⁷

What exactly does the author refer to when he speaks of these "better things"? Verses 10-12 explain verse 9 (note the gar, "for," connecting v. 10 to v. 9), and these verses mention several "better things." In verse 10 he mentions work and love and service in their lives:

⁵⁵The resumption of piouasa ... kai is assumed in v. 8, to enable the contrast with ekpherousa.

⁵⁶The author's shift in perspective is abrupt and is emphasized repeatedly. He had been speaking in the third person:

"those who have once been enlightened" (v. 4)

"if they then commit apostasy" (v. 6)

"they crucify" (v. 6)

But now in verse 9 he switches to the second person:

"in your case..." (v. 9)

"your work" (v. 10)

"the love which you showed" (v. 10)

"as you still do" (v. 10)

"each one of you" (v. 11)

"so that you may not be sluggish" (v. 12)

When McKnight analyzes the "audience" for the warning passages, he unjustifiably assumes that the audience for the epistle (which is of course a single group in a single location) is the same as the subjects who commit apostasy in 6:4-6. But 6:9 clearly distinguishes them (see 10:39, similarly). The author warns the readers in general because he thinks there are a few among them who may fall away, but this does not mean that he thinks they all fall in the category of people described in 6:4-6; to the contrary, he says that, for the most part, they do not.

⁵⁷Regarding the translation of echomena, BAGD, p. 334, III, translate the middle voice of echō as "hold oneself fast, cling to," and list Heb. 6:9 as the only New Testament example of this form used "of inner belonging and close association." They translate Heb. 6:9 as "things that belong to salvation" (cf. LSJ, p. 750, C: "hold oneself fast, cling closely"). Following BAGD, I have adopted the sense "belonging to" in my discussion, but I have also at times followed the

Your work and the love which you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.

In verse 11 he mentions full assurance of hope, which some have and which he wants all to have:

And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end.

In verse 12 he says that those who realize this "full assurance of hope" will have faith and patience:

so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

In this way he reassures those who are genuine believers -- those who show fruit in their lives and show love for other Christians, who show hope and genuine faith.

But the question is "better things" than what? What contrast is in the author's mind? The two possible interpretations are: (1) better things than being burned in judgment (v. 8),⁵⁸ or (2) better things than the good experiences of being enlightened, tasting, and partaking (vv. 4-5).

Interpretation (1) seems unlikely, because: (a) The adjective kreisson, "better," in Hebrews⁵⁹ is regularly used to contrast something better with something good (better covenant, better promises, better sacrifices, better possession, better country, etc), not something better with something bad. Therefore it is unlikely that he would say, "In your case we feel sure of

NIV, "accompany," which gives a somewhat similar sense, and does not affect the argument.

⁵⁸Another interpretation would be, better things than receiving blessings and then falling away (vv. 6), but this would essentially be the same as interpretation (1), since those who fall away in v. 6 are explained by the metaphor in vv. 7-8.

⁵⁹The author uses both spellings kreisson and kreitton. Thirteen of the nineteen occurrences in the New Testament are found in Hebrews, providing us with enough examples to see a pattern of emphasis or meaning.

something better than final judgment." (b) If the author had wanted to say, "I am convinced of something better than judgment for you, because you will be saved, not burned in judgment," he probably would not have used the plural ta kreissona ("better things"), but would have rather used a singular expression like "something better" (compare the singular kreitton ti in Heb. 11:40), in order to say "something better for you, that is, salvation."⁶⁰ (c) The better things he mentions are best understood not as future better things (future salvation rather than future judgment), but as present better things, because the present participle echomena in the phrase kai echomena sōtērias is most naturally understood as giving a sense of present duration over time, "things now presently belonging to salvation, and continuing to belong to salvation." (d) He had no need to assure them that they had not yet fallen away (both author and readers knew that, for the readers were still listening to him). Therefore his concern is not to tell them, "I am convinced of something better than that you have fallen away," and his contrast is not with falling away, but with the positive experiences in verses 4-5.

But interpretation (2) fits quite well: (a) On this interpretation these things are better than the good things mentioned in verses 4-6: enlightening, tasting, and partaking, so the author's usual sense of "better" in contrast to what is "good" is found here as well. (b) The author does not say that these "better things" are salvation (which would be a contrast to judgment), but that they are things that "accompany salvation" or "belong to salvation." This is consistent with

⁶⁰Lane, Hebrews 1-8, p. 144, says that the definite article in the phrase ta kreissona ("the better things") "is significant and looks back on the better of the two options contemplated in vv 7-8." However, the definite article does not require this sense here (it is not translated in this way by the RSV, NIV, or NASB), and is better understood as making the adjective substantival and giving the sense, "better (things)" (see BDF, §263 (3); A. T. Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research, 4th edn. (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), pp. 762-763; cf. 1 Cor. 1:27; 12:1;).

understanding the "better things" to be the virtues such as love, service, faith, and hope which he mentions in verses 10-12, all of which do belong to the Christian's experience of salvation, and all of which provide an appropriate comparison to the positive experiences in verses 4-6. (c) Since things like love and service and faith in verses 10-12 are the kinds of good fruit that do give evidence of salvation, it is reasonable to think that the author would say that these are "better" than the enlightening, tasting, and partaking in verses 4-6.

We may conclude that in verse 9 the author says he is confident that most of his readers have better things than the people he described in verses 4-6, and these things are better in that his readers also have things that belong to salvation.⁶¹ This implies that the blessings in verses 4-6 were not things that belong to salvation. This point is valid whether we translate the phrase kai echomena sōtōrias as "that is, things that belong to salvation" or "and things that belong to salvation."⁶²

In this way verse 9 provides a crucial key for understanding this whole passage. If the

⁶¹"Salvation" in this verse is not restricted to past, present, or future aspects of the Christian's experience, so it is best to understand it here in a broad sense, to refer to the whole of the Christian life (as in 2:10 and 5:9); see discussion of the term "salvation" in section I.A., above.

⁶²I have translated the kai as epexegetical ("that is,"). As such it indicates that "belonging to salvation" explains further what the author means by "better things." The NIV treats the kai as epexegetical: "better things in your case--things that accompany salvation" (NIV). However, the RSV translation, "better things that belong to salvation," essentially ignores the kai altogether and thereby obscures the fact that these better things stand in clear contrast to the good things mentioned in the previous verses.

It is also possible to translate kai here as "and," in which case the sense would be, "better things, and things belonging to salvation." (The NASB treats the kai this way: "better things concerning you, and things that accompany (mg.: or, belong to) salvation.")

The difference in translation makes no difference in my argument here, because in the first case, the things are better precisely in the fact that they belong to salvation, and this implies that the other things did not belong to salvation. In the second case the things still form a contrast to those things mentioned in verses 4-6, and this implies that the things in vv. 4-6 did not belong to salvation.

author had meant to say that the people mentioned in verses 4-6 were truly saved, then it is very difficult to understand why he would say in verse 9 that he is convinced of better things for his readers, that is, things that belong to salvation. In writing this he shows that the people that he speaks of in verses 4-6, while they had many blessings, did not have salvation.

One more point must be noted. This whole section in 6:9-12 makes it evident that "the author was making a distinction, and that he postulated a group of believers who would not be subject to a fall such as he described in verses 4-6."⁶³ This means that we cannot conclude that he thinks the falling away in verses 4-6 is a possibility for all Christians (a doctrinal conclusion different from the position of those who use this passage to argue that any Christian could lose salvation). Here the author thinks that most of his readers are in a different category -- they have fruit in their lives that gives them grounds for assurance of their salvation.⁶⁴

At this point it is appropriate to draw the following conclusions from verses 7-12: Verses 7-8 describe the people in verses 4-6 as unfruitful land that repeatedly bears thorns and thistles, and thus indicates that they were never saved. Verses 9-12 say that the readers, in general, have better things than the temporary experiences of verses 4-6, and that those better things include salvation. Therefore both verses 7-8 and verse 9 indicate that the people in verses 4-6 who fell away never had salvation.

E. Chapters 3-4: Comparison with the earlier state of those who fell away elsewhere in Hebrews

⁶³Roger Nicole, "Some Comments," p. 362.

⁶⁴This conclusion should follow even for those who think 6:4-6 describes true Christians who lost their salvation: verses 9-12 describe the majority of Christians, who are in a different category than that.

In Hebrews 3-4, the author frequently compares his readers to the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness. As he does in chapter 6, he warns his readers in chapters 3-4 not to fall away. But in chapters 3-4 he gives more explicit statements about the initial spiritual state of those who eventually fell away. The parallels are instructive, for they show that the author believed that people who fell away in the wilderness (a) had several blessings similar to the enlightening, tasting, and partaking in 6:4-6, but (b) never were saved.

For example, the fact that the people in 6:4-6 had been "enlightened" (6:4) means at least that they had heard and understood the gospel. Similarly, the author has already noted that many Israelites with Moses had heard the gospel (in old covenant form) but had never come to saving faith:

For good news came to us just as to them; but the message which they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers (4:2).

Similarly, the fact that the people in 6:4-6 had "tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (6:5) means at least that they had come to know by personal experience something of the excellent qualities of God's Word, and something of God's great power breaking into their lives. But the author has also noted similar experiences in the lives of unbelieving Israelites who were with Moses: they had experienced remarkable miracles (what could even be called "the powers of the age to come") in the plagues on Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna from heaven, the water from the rock, and even the very presence of the glory of God among them in the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Yet they had never been truly saved:

...your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.

Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their hearts; they have not known my ways' (3:9-10).

He does not say that they once had believing hearts and then went astray, but rather, "They always go astray in their hearts." He does not say that they had previously known God's ways and then had turned astray, but rather, "they have not known my ways." They had heard the good news, heard the voice of God, tasted the powers of the age to come, but they had never believed.

In a similar way, the author says,

Who were they that heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? And with whom was he provoked forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they should never enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief (3:16-19).

Here they had left Egypt -- they had been "redeemed" in the great Exodus from Egypt. But they were rebellious and continued in unbelief.

The point of this is simply to say that the people of 6:4-6 have some experiences that are compatible not only with the situation of those who are saved, but also with the situation of some who notoriously fell away, and the author tells us in explicit language that the Israelites who fell away were never saved in the first place. This conclusion is consistent with our earlier evidence that the people who fell away in 6:4-6 were never saved in the first place either. Furthermore, this passage resembles what we found in 6:4-6 regarding the kinds of people the author

discusses, for in chapters 3-4 only two kinds of people are in his mind: those who do not believe and fall away, and those who believe and persevere. He contemplates no third category (people who first believe and later fall away), either here or in 6:4-6.

F. Comparison with language describing the saved elsewhere in Hebrews

At this point we can broaden our investigation to examine language the author uses to describe those who are clearly saved elsewhere in the entire book of Hebrews.⁶⁵ This may help us to see whether or not the descriptions in 6:4-6 match the descriptions he elsewhere gives of those who are saved.

What verses in Hebrews shall we count as descriptions of those who are saved? It would not be legitimate to count passages where the author warns against certain kind of conduct (unbelief, falling away, disobedience), because he sees these as uncharacteristic of the Christian life. On the other hand, it would be legitimate to count passages where he encourages certain kinds of conduct (faith, persevering, obedience), because he counts these as characteristic of the Christian life. In addition, it would certainly be legitimate to count verses which speak of things that God has done in the lives of those who are saved (forgiven their sins, cleansed their consciences). Finally, except for passages that warn against certain kinds of conduct, it would be legitimate to count passages which speak in the first or second person of the author and the readers ("we, us," and "you"), since the author's overall approach is to consider himself and his

⁶⁵I am grateful to my colleague Scot McKnight ("Warning Passages") for his work in viewing Heb. 6:4-6 and 10:26-29 not in isolation, but in the light of all the passages in Hebrews which warn against falling away. His article gave me the idea to look in a similarly synthetic way at all of the descriptions of the saved in Hebrews. Though my doctrinal conclusion in this article is different from his, and though I differ with him at a number of points in this article, I found that his analysis provided me with helpful insight at many other points (several of which I have already cited).

readers generally to be believers.⁶⁶ But it would not be legitimate to count passages where the spiritual state of the people mentioned is in doubt or uncertain.⁶⁷ With these criteria in mind, we can compile the following list of descriptions of the saved in Hebrews.

We begin with several descriptions of what God has done in the lives of those who are saved:

1. God has forgiven their sins

The author applies to Christians the Lord's new covenant promise in Jeremiah, "I will remember their sins and their misdeeds no more" (Heb. 10:17; also 8:12).

2. God has cleansed their consciences

In contrast to the ineffectual sacrifices of the old covenant, the author says, "how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (9:14). He encourage believers to "draw near" to God "with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience..." (10:22). This cleansed conscience results from sins forgiven and it allows the saved to come into God's presence without fear of condemnation.

3. God has written his laws on their hearts

God had promised to do this for members of the new covenant, for he had said, "I will

⁶⁶I realize that he frequently warns them not to fall away, but this is simply because he knows there are some in the congregation whose spiritual status is unclear. He approaches them generally as believers with the possibility that there may be some unbelievers among them. His general approach is not, "You are all unbelievers" or "You have all fallen away," but, "Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:12-13).

⁶⁷Of course, I have not included material from the disputed passages 6:4-6 or 10:26-31, since I am here trying to gain a broader perspective from the rest of Hebrews that may help in

put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts" (8:10). The author says this is true of the saved, for he applies this statement to them in 10:16: "I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds."

4. God is producing holiness of life in them

The author uses a present participle to speak of the saved as those who "are being sanctified" (2:11 and 10:14; NASBmg). Part of this sanctifying process is God's fatherly discipline, for "he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness" (12:10). The author also tells Christians that he hopes that God will "equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever" (13:21).⁶⁸

5. God has given them an unshakable kingdom

The author exhorts his readers, "let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (12:28). He reminds them, "you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one" (10:34; cf. 11:16).

6. God is pleased with them

This is the dominant theme of Hebrews 11: those who have faith are pleasing to God.

understanding these passages.

⁶⁸On the other hand, the author also sees a completed past aspect of sanctification: He says, "we have been sanctified (h \square giasmenoi esmen) through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10). This perfect tense speaks of a completed past activity with continuing present results: the saved have been made holy (in some sense, perhaps in a moral sense of initial sanctification, or perhaps in an Old Testament ceremonial sense of being made fit to come before God in worship) and they still bear the results of that initial sanctifying work. (In a similar way, the apostle Paul can also call believers "those who have been sanctified (tois h \square giasmenois)"; see Acts 20:32).

"By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was attested as having pleased God" (11:5). The general truth is then summarized in 11:6: "And without faith it is impossible to please him." The implication is that with faith, which the author encourages the readers to have, it is possible to please God. Similarly, the author quotes the Lord's statement, "but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him" (10:38) -- implying that God does have pleasure in those who live by faith and do not shrink back. Moreover, believers are able to "offer to God acceptable (euarest^{ns}, pleasing) worship, with reverence and awe" (12:28), and when they "do good" and share their goods with others, "such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (13:16). The author hopes that God will continue to work in the readers "that which is pleasing in his sight" (13:21).

We now turn from these six descriptions of what God has done in the lives of the saved to descriptions of actions or qualities which characterize their lives.

7. The saved have been enlightened

Speaking to his readers, the majority of whom he considers to be saved, he says,

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated (10:32-33).

This shows that true Christians have been "enlightened." But we must realize that in this context the phrase almost certainly means, "heard the gospel." This is because the two paragraphs 10:26-31 and 10:32-39 form a clear contrast with each other, and they show two different responses to the gospel:

RESPONSE A: For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment... (10:26-27).

Here, "receiving the knowledge of the truth" simply means hearing and understanding the gospel, and probably also giving mental agreement or approval to it.⁶⁹ Therefore this response is (1) hear the gospel, and after hearing it (2) sin deliberately. This leads to (3) judgment. The author places this response in clear contrast to:

RESPONSE B: But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings....Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward....we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls (10:32, 35, 39).

This response is (1) hear the gospel, and after hearing it (2) endure with confidence and faith. This leads to (3) great reward and final salvation of their souls.

In this way, the author says that true Christians have been enlightened, but we must realize that the contrast with 10:26 shows that the enlightening means only hearing and understanding the gospel, and does not necessarily imply that they actually believed it. In this way, we can conclude that in Hebrews all true Christians have been enlightened, but not all who

⁶⁹A good parallel is found in Mark 4:16-17, which speaks of people who, "when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy." This certainly includes as much as "receiving the knowledge of the truth" in Heb. 10:26, and probably more: in both passages the people "receive" what they have heard (the verb lambanō is used in both verses), and in Mark 4, they even receive it "with joy." But in Mark 4 these people had no genuine spiritual life, because Jesus says in the next verse, "they have no root in themselves" (v. 17, indicating no source of spiritual life or nourishment in themselves). Therefore they "endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away" (v. 17).

have been enlightened are true Christians.

8. The saved have faith

This is probably the dominant description of the saved in Hebrews. The saved are not merely those who have heard the gospel, but those who have responded to it with faith. With respect to a past experience of coming to faith, the author can say, "We who have believed (hoi pisteusantes) enter that rest" (4:3).

There are many exhortations to continue in faith, showing that the author considers faith an essential element of the ongoing Christian life. The author encourages the readers to be "imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (6:12), and to consider the lives of their leaders and "imitate their faith" (13:7) -- both verses show that faith is a characteristic of those who are truly saved. The readers are encouraged to draw near to God "in full assurance of faith" (10:22), and to realize that the Lord says, "my righteous one shall live by faith" (10:38) -- in other words, faith is the essential element in the Christian life. The author tells the readers, "we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls" (10:39).⁷⁰ Then Hebrews 11:1-40 mentions faith twenty-four times in

⁷⁰Several of these preceding verses contain assurance of present genuine faith and thereby stand in contrast to the view of "phenomenological faith" advocated by Scot McKnight ("Warning Passages," pp. 23-24). He speaks of "phenomenological believers" as people who give signs or evidence (phenomena) of faith: they are "believers in every observable sense" ("Warning Passages," p. 24). He says, moreover, that "phenomenological believers" think they have saving faith: "The 'phenomenological' believer experiences faith so far as he or she is capable" (p. 24, n. 12). In addition, he thinks that no Christian in this life experiences anything other than this phenomenological faith, which may or may not be genuine saving faith:

...this 'phenomenological' faith is all that humans can experience in this present order of things; some of these believers persevere unto eternal life and others will not and so will be condemned. These former believers had a phenomenological faith but did not persevere; these latter believers had a phenomenological faith but did persevere and so had 'genuine' or 'true' or 'real' or 'saving' faith" (ibid.).

the course of exhorting the readers to imitate the faith of Old Testament believers, for by faith "the men of old received divine approval" (11:2).⁷¹ Therefore New Testament Christians are to run the race set before them, "looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..." (12:2).

Finally, it is important that faith continue to the end of one's life. The verse just quoted pictures a race yet to be run, a race that will continue, following in Jesus' steps, to the end of life. The author exhorts the readers to "hold fast our confidence" (3:6), to "hold our first confidence

He supports this idea by saying that in Hebrews, "'believer' is used for some who may be finally damned" (ibid.).

I differ with this position at several points: (1) The word "believer" is never used in Hebrews of anyone who is finally condemned (McKnight gives no references, and the pistis/pisteuo word group is never used this way in Hebrews). (2) This position would mean that there is no difference in outward evidence or in inward perception between those who merely give intellectual agreement or superficial consent to the gospel and those who have a genuine faith that includes heartfelt personal trust in Christ. But Hebrews speaks quite differently about the present assurance that comes with genuine faith: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1); the author is confident that "we are of those who have faith and keep their souls" (10:39); we can have "full assurance of faith" (10:22); Noah became [long before he died] "an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith" (11:7). Moreover, the Old Testament heroes of the faith by their obedience gave abundant compelling evidence that they had true faith (11:1-40). By contrast, the author does not say that those who fell away had faith but did not persevere in it (as McKnight's position would say); rather, he says they never had faith: the message they heard "did not meet with faith in the hearers" (4:2; cf. 3:10, 12; 4:19).

(3) This position would mean that no Christian could ever have present assurance of salvation, but would simply have to wait and persevere until the end of life in order to have confidence that he or she would be saved. But surely the New Testament generally, and Hebrews specifically, give many grounds for assurance in addition to perseverance (see 1:14; 4:3; 6:7, 9-10, 19-20; 7:19, 25; 8:10-2; 9:24; 10:10, 14, 16-18, 19-22, 39; 12:7, 28-29; also the article on assurance by D. A. Carson elsewhere in this volume, as well as Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), chapter 40). Paul's declaration likewise gives assurance of salvation based on present faith: "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

⁷¹McKnight helpfully observes that "of all the discontinuities of Hebrews (e.g., priesthood, covenant, sacrifice, etc.) the one dominating continuity is that the faith under the former covenant is the same kind of faith that is required of believers under the new covenant" ("Warning Passages," pp. 32-33, n. 36).

firm to the end" (3:14), and to "hold fast our confession" (4:14). (The idea of continuing in faith until the end of life is also indicated in 6:12; 11:13; and 13:7.)

9. The saved have hope

Closely related to faith is hope. Hope may be understood as faith directed toward the future, especially future fulfillment of God's promises. Thus, hope includes a confident expectation of future good based on trust in God's character and the truthfulness of his words.

The readers had hope, for they are encouraged to hold on to it, to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (10:23). Through a "better hope" than under the old covenant, they "draw near to God" (7:19). Their hope was also evident in their expectation of heaven: "You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one" (10:34), and, "we seek the city which is to come" (13:14). He encourages them to "show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end" (6:11), and to "seize the hope set before us" (6:18). Christ will return "to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (9:28). Such hope was also strong in the expectations of previous heroes of the faith, who "looked forward to the city which has foundations" (11:10), and who "looked to the reward" (11:26).

10. The saved have love

The author is sure that "God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love which you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do" (6:9), and gives specific evidence of this in the fact that they were "partners" with those who were persecuted, and they "had compassion on the prisoners" (10:33-34). He tells them to "consider how to stir up one another

to love and good works" (10:24), and says, "Let brotherly love continue" (13:1).

11. The saved worship and pray

The author encourages them, "let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe" (12:28), and says, "let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (13:15). Such worship is made possible by the amazing fact that new covenant believers have come not into the earthly temple, but "to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem..." (12:22). In fact, they have come not only into the heavenly city, but into the very Holy of Holies in the temple of God in heaven: "we have confidence to enter the sanctuary (eis tōn eisodon tōn hagiōn, literally, "into the holy places")⁷² by the blood of Jesus" (10:19).

The author says Christians have a high priest "who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (4:15). Therefore the saved are able to pray and be heard by God, and they are told, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (4:16; cf. 7:19, 25), and, "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (10:22).

12. The saved obey God

Just as the faith of Old Testament believers led to bold obedience, as when Noah built an ark (11:7), or when "Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance" (11:8), or when he offered up Isaac (11:17), or when Moses chose to avoid "the fleeting pleasures of sin" (11:25), so new covenant believers are to "do the will of

⁷²In Hebrews, "the holy places" (ta hagia) refers to the Holy of Holies, using the imagery of the Old Testament temple to speak of the greater heavenly reality in the very presence of God: see ta hagia in 8:2; 9:8, 25; 10:19; 13:11.

God" (10:36), and to "strive...for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (12:14). Their discipline by God will lead to "holiness" and "the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (12:10-11). So strong is the expectation of obedience that the author can say that those who are saved are those who obey: Jesus is "the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (5:9).

13. The saved persevere

As Scot McKnight so clearly demonstrated in his earlier article,⁷³ again and again the author of Hebrews emphasizes that those who are saved are those who continue in faith to the end of their lives, those who persevere in their allegiance to Christ. "We are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope" (3:6). Moreover, "we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end" (3:14). The author exhorts his readers to "show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end" (6:11), and says, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering" (10:23). They "have need of endurance" (10:36); they are not to "shrink back" (10:39); they are to "run with perseverance" (12:1); they should not "grow weary or fainthearted" (12:3); they are not to "lose courage" (12:5); they "have to endure" (12:7), just as many of them had previously "endured a hard struggle with sufferings" (10:32), and had not abandoned their faith.

14. The saved enter God's rest

The author says that "we who have believed enter that rest" (4:3), and also, "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest" (4:11). He is concerned "lest any of you be judged to have failed to reach it" (4:1).

15. The saved know God

⁷³See note 00, above.

In the new covenant age, "they shall not teach every one his fellow or every one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (8:11).

16. The saved are God's house, his children, and his people

The author uses various Old Testament metaphors and themes to characterize the saved. They are God's house, for he says, "And we are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope" (3:6). They are God's children, for they are the "many sons" who are brought to glory (2:10), and Christ can call them "my brothers" (2:12, NIV) and "the children God has given me" (2:13). And they are God's own people, for he says, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (8:10).

17. The saved share in Christ

In exhorting the readers to persevere in their faith, the author tells them, "For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end" (3:14).

18. The saved will receive future salvation

The author refers to Christians as "those who are to obtain salvation" (1:14), and says that Christ is "able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him" (7:25). Christ is "the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (5:9), and he will return "to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (9:28).

We can summarize these descriptions of the saved in the following list:

1. God has forgiven their sins
2. God has cleansed their consciences

3. God's laws written on their hearts
4. God producing holiness in them
5. God has given them a kingdom
6. God is pleased with them
7. They have been enlightened
8. They have faith
9. They have hope
10. They have love
11. They worship and pray
12. They obey God
13. They persevere
14. They enter God's rest
15. They know God
16. They are God's house, children, and people
17. They share in Christ
18. They will receive future salvation

Before we compare this list to 6:4-6, one conclusion that may be drawn is that, while perseverance in the faith is certainly one characteristic of the saved, it is not the only distinguishing characteristic. And falling away is only one of many characteristics of the lost.⁷⁴ This is because the actions of persevering and falling away do not occur in a vacuum -- they

⁷⁴I have not listed here the descriptions which the author gives for the lost in Hebrews, but they parallel the descriptions of the saved in many cases. For example: God has not forgiven their sins; God takes no pleasure in them; they have no faith and no hope; they are disobedient,

occur in the context of a life that has qualities which lead one to persevere or to fall away. For example, the author warns, "do not harden your hearts" (3:8) because he knows that hard hearts are involved when people fall away: "Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God" (3:12).⁷⁵ He knows that those who failed to enter God's rest did not just arbitrarily and unpredictably turn away from God's invitation, but they did so because there was no faith in their hearts: "they were unable to enter because of unbelief" (3:19), and "the message which they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers" (4:2). Therefore we must realize that the characteristics of the saved and the lost cannot be "mixed and matched"; they hold together in an integral relationship in each of two radically different kinds of life.

It is interesting that only one item on this list (they have been enlightened) is found in 6:4-6. And that item is seen, from the context of 10:32 and from the sense of the word phōtizō, to be true not only of Christians but also of others who hear the gospel but then reject it.⁷⁶ None of the other characteristics by which the author describes genuine Christians is found in 6:4-6:

⁴For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt.

do not worship or pray, do not enter God's rest, fall away, and will receive future judgment.

⁷⁵The connection between an unbelieving heart and falling away is clear whether we translate en plus the dative articular infinitive τῷ ἀποστῆναι to denote cause (as RSV), manner or attendant circumstance (NASB, "in falling away from the living God") or some kind of adjectival relationship (NIV, "that turns away from the living God").

This fact makes us realize that some of the statements that interpreters have made about Hebrews 6:4-6 in the past have been quite unguarded, and in fact have not been accurate. For example, a statement such as, "There is no more powerful description of a true Christian in the New Testament" is certainly an overstatement. The book of Hebrews itself gives many more powerful and detailed descriptions, one of which occurs immediately in 6:9-12. In several other places, when the author wants to, he can give much more clear descriptions of genuine Christians.

Nor is it true that 6:4-6 provides the most detailed description of a Christian that the author could give. For example, if the author had wanted to say that it is impossible to restore again to salvation those who have become genuine Christians and have then fallen away, he could have said something like this:

For it is impossible to restore again to faith those who have believed the message they heard, and have entered God's rest, and whose sins have been forgiven and whose consciences have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus, and who have had God's laws written on their hearts, and who have shown love in serving the saints, and who have persevered in hardship, and who have come into the Holy of Holies and drawn near to God and come boldly before the throne of grace, and who have offered to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, and have become God's children and his house and his people, if they then commit apostasy....

If that description or anything like it had been written, then we could rightly say, "No more clear description of genuine Christians could be given." But the fact remains that the actual phrases of

⁷⁶See discussion above, pp. 000-000.

Hebrews 6:4-6 are far different from this. And this gives one more indication that persons other than genuine Christians are being described here.⁷⁷

At this point someone may object that we must also compare Hebrews 6:4-6 with the descriptions of the lost that are found elsewhere in Hebrews. Is it not true that no decisive description of the lost is given in the following phrases?

(1) "who have once been enlightened,"

(2) "who have tasted the heavenly gift,"

(3) "and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,"

(4) "and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,"

and the implication that they

(5) had previously repented.

In response, I agree that the phrases alone do not match the author's descriptions of the lost, and they do not indicate that these people are lost (before they commit apostasy). But that is just the point: before they commit apostasy their spiritual status is uncertain. It remains to be seen whether they are among the saved or the lost. They have not yet given decisive indications either way. That is the whole reason the author warns them not to turn away -- they are still at a point where a decision to be among the saved or the lost must be made.

⁷⁷At this point someone may object that these descriptions in 6:4-6, while not used to refer to Christians elsewhere in Hebrews, are nevertheless valid descriptions of genuine Christians. Yet it must be remembered that this suggestion remains only a suggestion until it can be proven by a careful investigation of the specific words and phrases found in verses 4-6. Moreover, it must be recognized that, except for the individual words "enlightened" (phōtizō) and "repentance" (metanoia), none of the phrases that describe people in vv. 4-6 occur anywhere else in the New Testament.

Now some might argue that a few of the pre-apostasy conditions of these people were similar to one or another of these characteristics of the saved. For example, one could argue that "repentance" is similar to (12) obedience, or that it is connected to (8) faith. One could argue that being "enlightened" is similar to (8) faith. And one could argue that becoming a partaker of the Holy Spirit is similar to (17) sharing in Christ or (2) having a cleansed conscience or (3) having God's laws on one's heart. Moreover, one could argue that tasting the heavenly gift is similar to (5) receiving a heavenly kingdom, and that tasting "the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" is similar to (11) genuine worship and prayer, or (8) faith, or (15) knowing God.

But wherever there are similarities it is certain that there are also differences. We cannot just assume that being "enlightened" is the same as having saving faith, or that "repentance" is the same as obedience, unless this can be proven from a careful analysis of the meanings and contexts of the precise words the author used. And our analysis of these phrases in section II.B. (above) has shown that none of these phrases is a clear indication of any elements in the distinctive beginning stages of the Christian life: "Repentance" does not necessarily imply obedience or saving faith; being "enlightened" is not the same as saving faith; being a "partaker" in the Holy Spirit is not the same as sharing in Christ or having a cleansed conscience; and "tasting" the heavenly gift is not the same as receiving a heavenly kingdom. To assume that these things are the same is to fail to give adequate attention to the actual words which the author used.

G. Conclusions regarding Hebrews 6:4-6

We began with the question: Does Hebrews 6:4-6 describe people who had experienced

the decisive beginning stages of a genuine Christian life, and who then had fallen away and lost their salvation? Careful analysis of the terms used to describe these people before they fell away showed that, while the terms could be used to apply to genuine Christians, they could also be used to apply to people who were not yet Christians but who had simply heard the gospel and had experienced several of the blessings of the Holy Spirit's work in the Christian community. In other words, these terms tell us that the people had experienced many of the preliminary stages that often precede the beginning of the Christian life, but they did not tell us that the people had experienced any of the decisive beginning stages of the Christian life. Therefore, the spiritual status of these people before they fell away could not be determined on the basis of the terms in 6:4-6 alone.

However, an examination of the metaphor of the field in verses 7-8, which the author uses to explain verses 4-6, showed that the people in 4-6 were like a field that received frequent rain but only bore thorns and thistles. This indicated that, in the author's mind, the people in 4-6 had received many blessings but had never borne good fruit because they had been like bad ground the entire time: there had never been true spiritual life in them.

An examination of verses 9-12 led us to a similar conclusion. Though the author had been speaking of the possibility of some of his readers falling away, his view of most of them was much different: He felt sure that, in general, his readers were in possession of "better things" than the preliminary experiences in 4-6, and that the better things were in fact "things belonging to salvation." This implied that the blessings of 4-6, while positive, nevertheless did not belong to (or accompany) salvation. Then in verses 10-12 the author names those "better things" as the good fruits of work, love, service for others, hope, faith, and patience.

A comparison with chapters 3 and 4 showed that the author thought of the rebellious people of Israel in the wilderness as people who had experiences similar to being enlightened, tasting the blessings of redemption, tasting the goodness of the word of God, and associating with, seeing, and benefitting from some of the works of the Holy Spirit -- yet they never had faith (4:2), they always went astray in their hearts (3:10), and they had never known God's ways (3:10). This example provided a parallel case of another group of people who had many remarkable experiences of blessing from God, but were never really saved.

Then an examination of descriptive terms used by the author to describe Christians elsewhere in Hebrews revealed that only one term in 6:4-6 ("enlightened") was used elsewhere to describe believers, and that term referred only to hearing and understanding the gospel, not to any of the decisive beginning stages of the Christian life. The most significant finding was that none of the other seventeen descriptions of true Christians in Hebrews was used in 6:4-6. This indicated that if the author had wanted to say that it is impossible for true Christians who fall away to come back to salvation, he certainly could have done so clearly, but he did not. In 6:4-6 he chose to use language that does not describe those who are truly saved.

Therefore, confining our attention to the book of Hebrews itself, and examining 6:4-6 in its immediate and broader context within the book, leads us to the conclusion that the people in this passage who experienced many blessings and then fell away had never truly been saved in the first place.

II. Analysis of other warning passages in Hebrews

A. Hebrews 2:1-4

We can now turn our attention to the remaining warning passages in Hebrews, comparing their teaching to that of 6:4-6.

In Hebrews 2, the author warns against drifting away after hearing the gospel:

Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ²For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, ⁴while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will (Heb. 2:1-4).

This text has not created controversy regarding the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, for it contains no phrases that might indicate the decisive beginning stages of the Christian life. The only possible exception to this is the second person plural, "we." Someone could argue that the author in this use of "we" implies that any Christian might "drift away" from the gospel and "neglect" this great salvation.

But this is not a necessary inference from the expression. The author needs some way of speaking about himself and his readers as an entire group, and the use of the second person plural is an ordinary conversational convention for doing that. It does not imply that everyone in the group is subject to everything discussed using this convention, but only that some (at least) are included. In this case, the author knows that some among his readers are in danger of falling away, but he does not know specifically who they are, so he includes this general kind of

warning at several places in the epistle.⁷⁸ The passage is similar to 6:4-6 in that the people warned are those who have heard the gospel message and experienced miracles (this is similar to tasting the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come). As in 6:4-6, we cannot tell whether people who have had such experiences are believers or not. They are simply warned against drifting away after these experiences.

B. Hebrews 3:6-4:13

This passage is an extended comparison between the readers and the people of Israel in the wilderness. Only a brief analysis is necessary, since we discussed earlier the fact that the people heard the word of God, experienced miracles, saw the works of God for forty years, and yet never believed.⁷⁹

When the author speaks directly about the present situation of his readers, however, some strong warnings are included.

... Christ was faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope. ⁷Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, when you hear his voice, ⁸do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,

⁷⁸Similar "we" statements are found in other warnings in Hebrews:

And we are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope (3:6).

For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end (3:14).

For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment...(10:26-27).

For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven (12:25).

on the day of testing in the wilderness, ⁹where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. ¹⁰Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their hearts; they have not known my ways.'
¹¹As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" ¹²Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.
¹⁴For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end,
¹⁵while it is said, "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." ¹⁶Who were they that heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? ¹⁷And with whom was he provoked forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸And to whom did he swear that they should never enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief (Heb. 3:6-19).

The warnings are continued in chapter 4:

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest remains, let us fear lest any of you be judged to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them; but the message which they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers.... Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no

⁷⁹See above, section I.E., pp. 000-000.

one fall by the same sort of disobedience (4:1-2, 11).

In these sections the repeated warning is against hardening their hearts against the message which they have heard (3:8, 12, 15; 4:7). The hardness of heart accompanies unbelief and falling away from the living God (3:12, 19; 4:2), and also is evident in disobedience (4:6, 11).

For our purposes 3:14 is especially relevant:

For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm to the end (NASB).

This verse provides an excellent perspective on the doctrine of perseverance. How do we know if "we have become partakers⁸⁰ of Christ"? How do we know if this being joined to Christ has happened to us at some time in the past?⁸¹ One way in which we know that we have come to genuine faith in Christ is if we continue in faith until the end of our lives. D. A. Carson writes,

...close attention to the tenses in Hebrews 3:14 reveals an extra ingredient in this verse. We have become (gegonamen) -- in the past! -- partakers of Christ if we now, in the present, hold firmly to the confidence we had at first. It follows from this verse that although perseverance is mandated, it is also the evidence of what has taken place in the past....If persevering shows we have (already) come to share in Christ, it can only be because sharing in Christ has perseverance for its

⁸⁰Here the context indicates that metochos, "partaker," is used in the sense of having a saving interest in Christ, because it is parallel to entering God's eschatological rest, and accompanies holding one's confidence firm to the end.

⁸¹The author uses the perfect tense verb gegonamen, "we have become" (at some time in the past, with results that continue into the present).

inevitable fruit.⁸²

Therefore, far from saying that those who have been saved can lose their salvation, this verse says that only those who persevere in the Christian life were ever truly saved (savingly participated in Christ) in the first place. And the implication is that those who fall away never did become partakers in Christ -- those who fall away show that they never were saved.

However, attention to the context of Hebrews 3:14 will keep us from using this and similar passages in a pastorally inappropriate way. We must remember that there are other evidences elsewhere in Scripture that give Christians assurance of salvation,⁸³ so we should not think or teach that assurance that we belong to Christ is impossible until we die. Nevertheless, continuing in faith is the one means of assurance that is named here by the author of Hebrews. He mentions this to warn his readers that they should not fall away from Christ, because he is writing to a situation where such a warning is needed (see 3:12). In fact, in all of the passages where continuing to believe in Christ to the end of our lives is mentioned as one indication of genuine faith, the purpose is never to make those who are presently trusting in Christ worry that sometime in the future they might fall away (and we should never use these passages that way either). Rather, the purpose is always to warn those who are thinking of falling away or have fallen away that if they do this it is a strong indication that they were never saved in the first place.

C. Hebrews 10:26-31

Our analysis of this passage can be much more brief, since it has several similarities to

⁸²D. A. Carson, Exegetical Fallacies (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 88.

⁸³See the discussion of assurance and of evidences of salvation in D. A. Carson's chapter elsewhere in this book.

6:4-6:

For if we sin deliberately⁸⁴ after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. ²⁸A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." ³¹It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:26-31).

As with 6:4-6, a reasonable argument can be made that these people were genuine Christians before they rejected Christ and fell away. On the view that these people were once saved, "if we sin deliberately" implies that the author thinks that he himself or anyone among his readers might actually fall into such sin. Also according to this view, "receiving the knowledge of the truth" is equivalent to coming to saving faith, and "sanctified" refers to the initial break with actual sin that occurs at the beginning of the Christian life.

But once again it must be said that none of these phrases gives a decisive indication of the spiritual state of a person. As was true with 2:1-4, the use of "we" is just a verbal convention that enables the author to speak of his readers in general, without implying that every one of

⁸⁴The present participle indicates an ongoing pattern of sin; the NIV translates, "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left" (Heb. 10:26). Willful and persistent rejection of the truth and living in rebellion against it are in view in this verse.

them is in the situation described in the "we" clauses.⁸⁵

To "receive the knowledge of the truth" simply means to hear and understand the gospel, and probably also to give mental agreement or approval to it.⁸⁶ In this way, the phrase is similar in meaning to "enlightened" in 6:4. But this is not the same as saving faith, which must include individual trust in Christ as a person.

When the author talks about the blood of the covenant "that sanctified him," the word "sanctified" need not refer to the internal moral purification that comes with salvation, for the term hagiazō has a broader range than that, both in Hebrews and in the New Testament generally. For example, Hebrews 9:13 says,

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify (hagiazō) them so that they are outwardly clean (NIV).

The author of Hebrews says that an Old Testament ceremony of sacrificial sprinkling sanctified people⁸⁷ -- that is, it made them "ceremonially clean," so that they could once again worship with God's people. But it was only outward sanctification, not the internal sanctification that accompanies true salvation.

Another non-saving sense of hagiazō, "sanctify," is found in 1 Corinthians 7:14:

⁸⁵See above, pages 000-000.

⁸⁶See the discussion of Heb. 10:32 on p. 000, above.

⁸⁷The most fitting Old Testament background is Numbers 19:9-19, where the ashes of a heifer that had been sacrificed are mixed with water and sprinkled on persons who have come into contact with a dead body. After this has been done, the cleansed persons are once again permitted to enter the assembly of the Lord's people. But the general point the author is making is that ceremonial sprinkling in the Old Testament made people able once again to worship with

For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy (NIV).

Here the sense is not that the unbeliever has been saved, but that some positive moral influence has been brought to bear on him or her.

Jesus also uses hagiazō to refer to ceremonial purification:

You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? (Matt. 23:17, 19).

In both cases, hagiazō is used in the sense, "make sacred" or "make ceremonially pure." In 1 Timothy 4:5, Paul uses hagiazō to say that food can be "consecrated by the word of God and prayer." And Peter says Christians are to "revere (hagiazō) Christ as Lord" (1 Pet. 3:15) in their hearts -- here the sense is "to think of as holy."

These other examples do not of course prove that hagiazō in Hebrews 10:29 must refer to something other than the internal sanctification that accompanies salvation, but it means that we should not simply assume that hagiazō means saving sanctification either. Moreover, the entire context in which 10:29 occurs, from 9:1 to 10:39, is concerned with parallels between the Old Testament Levitical sacrifices and the better new covenant sacrifice of Christ. Because a ceremonial focus pervades this context, a ceremonial sense of "sanctify" would be appropriate in 10:29. This is especially true in the immediate context of 10:19-31, for the author is speaking of the fact that the congregation in general has a "new and living way" (10:20) available by the

God's people.

blood of Jesus, and therefore can "enter the sanctuary" (10:19) and "draw near" (10:22) into God's presence.⁸⁸

But the author of Hebrews knows that some may fall away, even though they assemble with the congregation of believers and so share in this great privilege of coming before God. So he says, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another..." (10:25). The reason to encourage one another is the warning in 10:26, "For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth..." In such a context, it is appropriate to understand "profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified" to mean "by which he was given the privilege of coming before God with the congregation of God's people." In this sense, the blood of Christ opened up a new way of access to God for the congregation -- it "sanctified" them in a parallel to the Old Testament ceremonial sense -- and this person, by associating with the congregation, was also "sanctified" in that sense: he or she had the privilege of coming before God in worship.⁸⁹ But then deliberate, continual sin, by which the person has "spurned the Son of God" and "outraged the Spirit of grace" (10:29), in spite of this great privilege, will certainly result in "a fearful prospect of judgment" (10:27).⁹⁰

⁸⁸In this context of congregational worship, there is a parallel to the action of Moses in throwing "the blood of the covenant" (Exod. 24:8) on the whole congregation to seal the covenant to them, even though certainly there were unbelievers in the congregation: all could stand in the congregation assembled before the Lord.

⁸⁹Regarding hagiazō in Heb. 10:29, A. H. Strong, Systematic Theology (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1907), p. 884, says it refers to "external sanctification, like that of the ancient Israelites, by outward connection with God's people." Robert A. Peterson says, "In view of the contrast here between Old and New Covenants, I take 'sanctified' here to mean set apart covenantally as belonging to God" ("Apostasy," p. 25).

⁹⁰There is an entirely different understanding of the phrase "by which he was sanctified" in 10:29 which should be mentioned at this point. Against the Old Testament background in which hagiazō meant "to make fit to come before God," the phrase may refer not to the deliberate sinner but to Christ: "How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man

As he did in 6:4-12, the author follows his severe warning with a contrasting passage in which he comforts the readers with a reassurance that he does not think they are among those who will fall away. He reminds them that they have endured in the face of persecution (10:32-34), encourages them to persevere (10:35-38), and then concludes,

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls.

Here he follows a consistent pattern in the epistle, indicating that he only knows of two categories of people: (1) those who do not have faith and fall away ("shrink back") and (2) those who believe ("have faith") and persevere. He knows of no third category (those who have faith and fall away). Once again, then, this concluding passage (10:32-39) supports the idea that those who fell away in the preceding warning passage (10:26-31) were never part of those who "have faith" in the first place. We conclude that there is no decisive consideration in Hebrews 10:26-31 to make us think that it refers to someone who was genuinely saved. It refers rather to someone who heard and understood the gospel, and joined in worship before God with the assembly of Christians, but who rejected this great privilege and therefore became liable to "a fearful prospect

who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he [Christ] was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace?" Grammatically, en ho hōgiasthō could just as easily refer to "the Son of God" in the previous phrase. Though Hebrews does not elsewhere say that Christ was "sanctified," Jesus does say this about himself in John 17:19 ("for their sake I consecrate (hagiazō) myself"). Conceptually, the author does speak of Christ elsewhere as being "made perfect" (2:10; 5:9), and speaks of his blood as the means through which he entered the Holy Place in heaven (9:12). This interpretation is favored by Roger Nicole, "Some Comments," p. 356, n. 1, following John Owen. Although I have not adopted this interpretation here, it is certainly possible, and deserves further consideration.

Another possibility is to understand "profaned the blood of the covenant" to mean that this person falsely took the blood of the communion cup, thus profaning it (so P. Hughes, Hebrews, p. 423).

Yet another possibility is to translate en ho hōgiasthō impersonally, "by which one is

of judgment" (10:27).

D. Hebrews 12:25

Here the author gives a final warning:

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.

No new issues arise in this warning text, but once again we should notice that the warning is against rejecting the message that has been heard. This is the same warning that he has issued throughout the epistle (2:1; 3:7-8, 15; 4:1-2; 6:4-5; 10:26). Those who are in danger of falling away are those who have heard and understood the message, and have associated with the congregation of believers, but have given no clear indication of their response or their internal spiritual state. But neither in this nor in any of the other warning passages do we find indications that true Christians can lose their salvation.

III. Comparison with related passages in the rest of the New Testament

To this point I have not brought into the discussion any considerations from the doctrinal teachings in the rest of Scripture on the perseverance of the saints. But the question we are investigating is ultimately a theological one, and therefore, for Christians who think that the whole Bible is our ultimate authority in doctrine, it is necessary at some point to compare the exegetical conclusions on 6:4-6 (and the other warning passages) with the teachings of the rest of Scripture (which really forms the larger "context" in which any passage appears). Far from

sanctified" (mentioned but not adopted by McKnight, "Warning Passages," p. 43, n. 80).

being inappropriate, I think this procedure is necessary for right exegesis in general, and especially for exegesis that attempts to contribute to understanding doctrinal questions. John Owen observed this long ago:

And so usually doth it fall out, very unhappily, with men who think they see some peculiar opinion or persuasion in some singular text of Scripture, and will not bring their interpretations of it unto the analogy of faith, whereby they might see how contrary it is to the whole design and current of the word in other places.⁹¹

In fact, the idea that we should not attempt to find exegetical conclusions that are consistent with the teachings of other passages is an artificial restriction that none of the original readers faced, for they all had knowledge of the Old Testament and of the apostolic teaching which they had received (which was consistent with the content of our New Testament), and that knowledge influenced their understanding of each epistle they read.

I will not discuss here the substantial weight of biblical evidence that teaches that genuine Christians cannot lose their salvation. I have argued this at length elsewhere,⁹² as have many others. But it must be said that those who take the view that 6:4-6 describes genuine Christians who lost their salvation have an obligation not only to give a reasonable explanation of 6:4-6, but also of those other passages which repeatedly teach that true Christians will certainly persevere (for example, John 6:38-40; 10:27-29; Rom. 8:1, 30; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; Phil. 1:6; 1 Pet. 1:5;

⁹¹John Owen, Hebrews, vol. 3, p. 69. For Owen, the "analogy of faith" meant a comparison of one's conclusions on one passage with the teaching of other related passages in Scripture.

⁹²See Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), chapter 40, "Perseverance"; also The First Epistle of Peter, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 58-59.

and passages on eternal life: John 3:36; 5:24; 6:4-7; 10:28; 1 Jn. 5:13).⁹³

But is our basic claim that 6:4-6 describes unsaved people consistent with other passages in the New Testament? Does the New Testament speak elsewhere of people who had heard and agreed with the gospel, and had associated with the church, but never had been truly converted? It does in a number of places. For example, Jesus speaks of people who give an initial impression of faith but then fall away:

And these in like manner are the ones sown upon rocky ground, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away (Mark 4:16-17).

They "hear the word" (they are enlightened) and they respond with joy (this is at least tasting the heavenly gift and the goodness of the word of God). But they were never truly saved, for Jesus

⁹³McKnight criticizes Nicole because, regarding the meaning of "repentance" in Heb. 6:6, he says Nicole "prefers an explanation that it extremely difficult (and I would say 'impossible') over giving up his theological position! This is a confession of eisegesis, not responsible exegesis" (p. 52).

But the problem is not as simple as McKnight claims: Nicole has given thirteen other verses from the New Testament which provide strong support for the idea that Christians cannot lose their salvation, and he says that these verses "constitute only a fraction of the scriptural support for perseverance" (p. 358). But McKnight gives no alternative explanation for these verses. From Nicole's perspective (and mine), the exegetical difficulties involved in denying that these other verses teach perseverance would be far greater than the exegetical difficulties of saying that metanoia in Heb. 6:6 need not mean saving repentance. McKnight presents Nicole's method as a question of theology versus exegesis, but it is really a question of exegesis against exegesis. In order to solve a theological problem (which is part of Nicole's purpose, and McKnight's), at some point every Christian must attempt to formulate a synthesis in which all relevant biblical passages are understood in a way that yields a consistent formulation. With respect to this difficult doctrine of perseverance, Nicole has made an admirable attempt at such synthesis, while McKnight has not made such an attempt; therefore it seems to me that his criticism of Nicole in this regard is unduly severe.

says, "they have no root in themselves." They fall away and are lost.

As for becoming "partakers of the Holy Spirit," Jesus also speaks of those who so strongly resist the conviction of the Holy Spirit that they commit blasphemy against him:

And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come (Matt. 12:32).

And the people who say on the last day,

Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? (Matt. 7:22)

were never born again, for Jesus says to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers" (v. 23). (Note that he does not say to them, "I knew you once but now I do not know you," but rather, "I never knew you.")

Similarly, Stephen says to the unbelieving Jews, "you always resist the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). There was a convicting work of the Holy Spirit which they experienced (we might say they tasted of it, or became partakers in it), but they stubbornly rejected it.

John also writes of people who associated for a time with the church, but their falling away demonstrated that they never were truly part of the community of believers:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us (1 John 2:19).

When we put together the testimony of these verses, we realize that there are people who have genuine spiritual experiences that are at least as strong as those mentioned in Hebrews 6:4-

6, but who have never truly experienced salvation. Therefore our interpretation of 6:4-6 does not make it a unique or unusual passage in the New Testament generally, but one which fits well with other sections of the New Testament.

IV. Conclusions for the doctrine of perseverance of the saints

The book of Hebrews contributes helpfully to the traditional Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. It certainly does not contradict it. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints teaches (1) that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God's power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and also (2) that only those who persevere until the end are truly born again. The first half of the doctrine is taught frequently in Hebrews, as Roger Nicole has so eloquently affirmed with reference to many passages on God's faithfulness, Christ's redemptive work, and the status of believers,⁹⁴ but that has not been our focus in this study. The second half of the doctrine is affirmed quite directly in 3:14, but it is also reinforced by the author's frequent exhortations to continue in faith, to press on to maturity, and not to fall away. In fact, Reformed Christians, in studying Hebrews, would do well to recognize that such strong moral exhortations to press on and not fall away are consistent with a belief in God's sovereign power to keep his own children safe for eternity, for God's sovereignty often works through human means such as warnings and exhortations: these warnings will often be the very means God uses to keep his own from turning away. This does not imply that a true believer could lose salvation, but it does imply that the impossibility of losing salvation does not rest ultimately in any inherent ability in the believer himself or herself, but in the power of God

⁹⁴See especially Nicole, "Some Comments," p. 359; see also footnote 70, above.

at work, usually in many different internal and external ways, in the believer's life.