

## TOWARDS A NEW INTERPRETATION OF HEBREWS 6:4-6

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**I**T IS NO SECRET that Hebrews 6:4-6 has puzzled exegetes for centuries and has given rise to a variety of interpretations. In his recent study, *The Problem of Metanoia in the Epistle to the Hebrews*,<sup>1</sup> James K. Solari traces the history of the interpretation of Hebrews 6 and summarizes the views of all the major figures who have sought to understand verses 4-6. These include Tertullian, who distinguishes between remissible and irremissible sin; St. John Chrysostom, who insists that the writer was speaking about the impossibility of a second baptism; the medieval theologians who attempt to see this passage as consistent with their sacramental practice of granting absolution for post-baptismal sin; John Calvin, who relates this to the sin against the Holy Spirit as well as to the doctrine of election and reprobation; H. Windisch, who attributes the extremism here to the prevalent eschatological view of an imminent parousia; C. Spicq, who attempts to demonstrate the psychological impossibility for repentance in one who has fallen away from the faith; and O. Michel, who maintains that the homiletic genre of this passage defies any careful scrutiny for doctrinal precision. Solari concludes his overview with the observation: "Upon consultation of commentaries and monographs on this letter, one encounters one or other of the above approaches, or at times even a combination of them."<sup>2</sup> This is precisely what Solari does in his own interpretation, primarily combining elements from Spicq's psychological theory and Michel's non-doctrinal character of paraenesis view.

It would be presumptuous for me to claim that I have discovered an interpretation of Hebrews 6:4ff. which has not been advanced in nearly twenty centuries of Christian reflection on this passage and which finally

<sup>1</sup> Unpublished doctoral dissertation. The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 1970.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

solves all of the hermeneutical problems that have been raised. However, a careful reading of Solari's overview of the history of interpretation and a perusal of commentaries and other published studies of this passage reveals two things. First, invariably interpreters discuss the problem of this passage in connection with the question of the possibility of irreversible apostasy in an individual believer and not with reference to the covenant community. To put it otherwise, they find this passage difficult because it seems to jeopardize the doctrine of individual election of Israel and/or the church as the chosen community of God. Secondly, hardly any attention is paid to Heb. 6:7-8 except to see them as a parable or illustration of the truth contained in vv. 4-6. One can hardly find a commentary which looks upon these verses as an integral part of the argument that is being built.

What I wish to propose in this study is that verses 7-8 form the basis for verses 4-6. When we examine the Old Testament passage referred to here, we will note that the primary concept in the author's mind is that of a covenant community and not the individual child of God. Thus when we read of the falling away and of God's subsequent rejection, it is rejection of a community that is in focus. Such a rejection does not necessarily include every individual member of that community; in both Old Testament and New Testament parallel passages, this same theme can be found. In other words, God's rejection of his covenant community does not jeopardize the doctrine of election and the preservation or perseverance of the saints as it applies to the individual believer.

## I

The word *gar* in verse 7 is a very important one. It is part and parcel of a whole series of words, such as "therefore," "wherefore," "for," "because," "since," etc. These words occur with such regularity in the book of Hebrews that one can hardly read three or four verses without encountering some casual connective. I know of no thorough study made of these sorts of words in the Epistle to the Hebrews, but such a study, it appears, would uncover that, in spite of the hortatory sections scattered throughout, the book contains one of the most highly developed and logically deduced arguments of the New Testament. And the point I wish to make is that the *basis* for verses 4-6 is given in the immediately following verses (vv. 7-8).

Solari correctly sees the importance of the *gar* connective in verse 4:

"The warning in vv. 4-6 supplies the grounds for the author's resolution in vs. 3. This is the force of the particle *gar* which joins the two."<sup>3</sup> But when he comes to verse 7, he makes no reference to the force of *gar*: "To illustrate his conviction, the author proposes an allegory in which he draws upon the processes of agriculture and compares them to growth or stagnation in the moral life of the Christian."<sup>4</sup>

It is true that *gar* does not always have the force of cause or reason. Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich give three other possible uses: the force of further explanation, of result, or of mere continuance (comparable to *de*). It would appear that the latter two of these are not applicable here; surely verses 7-8 are not a result of verses 4-6, nor is the writer here using *gar* simply to move on to a new theme.<sup>5</sup> This leaves either the causal use (by far the predominant one) or the explanatory one (which would fit the idea of introducing an illustration). I definitely prefer the simple causal idea, but even the explanatory idea ("what I mean is . . .") implies a definite causal relationship between the illustration and the stated principle. We have little choice but to see some causal connection between verses 7-8 and 4-6. To some extent, verses 7-8 form the basis for the writer being able to make one of the most astounding statements in the Scriptures. In other words, when the writer says that it is impossible to renew a certain group of people to repentance, he can say this *because* he knows that land which has been cultivated (and is thus expected to bring forth fruit) will face destruction if it brings forth thorns instead. If we can only uncover the true meaning of these two verses, perhaps we will be able to understand better verses 4-6.

## II

We must ask first of all whether verses 7-8 merely refer to an agricultural illustration. Such would be quite unlike any of the other arguments used in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Where else does one find the author using a parable or an allegory as a crucial step in his argument? He uses very few metaphors, similes or illustrations in the entire

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> According to Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich, the examples of *gar* as continuance are found exclusively in the Pauling epistles, and perhaps in Mark (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed., 1979] p. 152.)

book. This is not his usual manner of developing his argument or of presenting truth. Commentators are agreed that the arguments used in Hebrews are almost exclusively based solidly on Old Testament passages (some, such as the texts quoted in Hebrews 1, get a fleeting reference; others, such as Ps. 95:7-11, Ps. 110:4, Jer. 31:31-34, Prov. 3:11-12, are more thoroughly expounded). Sometimes the Old Testament references are direct quotations; at other times there are indirect references to Old Testament passages, such as the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 and references to Esau and Abel and the Mt. Sinai experience in Hebrews 12. This forces us to ask whether or not there is an Old Testament passage being used in Heb. 6:7-8. And the likelihood of this is increased when we realize how many of the Old Testament references are introduced with *gar*: for example, Heb. 1:5, 2:5, 4:3, 6:13, 7:1, 7:17, 8:8, 10:15, 10:30, 10:37, 12:20, 12:25.<sup>6</sup>

Is there, then, a passage in the Old Testament which speaks of a well-cultivated field which is supposed to yield good fruit but yields thorns (*akanthas*) instead? The answer is in the affirmative: Isaiah 5:1-7, Isaiah's song of the vineyard. Now admittedly we read in our English Bibles in Is. 5:2b: "... and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes." However, the Septuagint reads significantly differently here: "... and he expected it to produce grapes, but it produced thorns (*akanthas*)," exactly the same word as is used in Heb. 6:8. This is significant, especially when we realize the tendency, well-attested elsewhere, for the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews to use the Septuagint as his Old Testament text.<sup>7</sup>

There are other parallels between Is. 5:1-7 and Heb. 6:7-8 as well, though perhaps less dramatic. Both Isaiah and Hebrews make it plain that the field is well-cultivated. Isaiah gives a full description of all that the owner did for the field in order that it might produce the best grapes possible; Hebrews gives a general phrase indicating that, since it is well-cultivated, the owners can expect a good, useful crop. Furthermore, perhaps the chief feature of the field that Hebrews mentions is that it is

<sup>6</sup> Another passage introduced by *gar*, which at first sight appears to be a simple illustration but may very well be an Old Testament reference, is Heb. 3:4, where the writer alludes to Is. 40:28 and perhaps also Ps. 126:1.

<sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce asserts: "The form in which the Old Testament is quoted throughout the epistle is regularly that of the Septuagint version" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964] p. li.).

well-watered with rain (*hueton*); one of the key features of the punishment in Is. 5:6 is the command that the field receive no more rain (*hueton*). Finally, the end result expressed in both Hebrews and Isaiah, though stated differently, is basically the same. According to Hebrews 6, the land is good only for burning (*eis kausin*); according to Isaiah 5 in the Septuagint, the end result is a field full of thorns as in a dry, barren wasteland (*eis cherson*) which would be controlled, according to ancient agricultural techniques, by periodic burning.<sup>8</sup>

I recognize full well that some commentators, such as F. F. Bruce, make a passing reference to Isaiah 5 when dealing with verses 7-8. But no one to my knowledge has attempted to use Isaiah 5 as the key to interpreting verses 4-6. If, however, the basis of Heb. 6:4-6 is the song of the vineyard in Is. 5:1-7, some further light is shed on the message of the writer to the Hebrews. For what Isaiah is talking about in Isaiah 5 is the nation of Israel, "the house of Israel" and "the men of Judah" (vs. 7). This places the interpretation of Heb. 6 squarely within the context of God's relationship to his people as a covenant community. Too often interpreters have looked upon Heb. 6:4-6 in the light of individual election and the preservation of individual saints, but the writer of Hebrews is telling us we must understand this in terms of God's dealing with his covenant people as a community.

### III

There are other elements here which confirm this communal structure for the understanding of Heb. 6:4-6. There is the whole blessing-curse motif in Heb. 6:7-8, *eulogia* and *katara*. These are precisely the two words used in Deut. 11:26-28 where God places before his covenant people two options: blessing<sup>9</sup> for obedience and curse for apostasy and disobedience. These blessings and curses are further elaborated in Deuteronomy 28-30, with the final curse (the *telos*) being the destruction of the land as the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, leaving it "a burnt-out waste, unsown, and growing nothing, where no grass can sprout"

<sup>8</sup> Solari says, "The process of burning the noxious weeds off was familiar practice to the contemporary farmers (cf. Matt. 13:30, Jo. 15:6). . . ." (*The Problem of Metanoia*, p. 88.)

<sup>9</sup> Note that the first blessing referred to in Deut. 11:13 is *hueton tee gee*, "rain upon the land," to bring forth grain, wine, oil, grass, that is, vegetation in general.

(Dt. 29:23). Again, the point to note here is that Moses is speaking to the total covenant *community*, to the people of God as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

We find an interesting parallel in the Gospels where similar agricultural language is used to express God's dealings with his people as a corporate unit. In Matt. 7:16, Jesus is encouraging his people to beware of the false prophets who will seek to destroy their community. The false prophets can be recognized by their fruits. Then Jesus asks the question, "Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?" The same two words occur here, *staphulas* and *akanthas*, as in the Septuagint version of Isaiah 5. Jesus goes on to talk about the good tree and the bad tree, with the fruitless tree being cut down for burning. This tree motif occurs elsewhere in the Gospels as a warning to the people of Israel as a whole. The parable of the fruitless fig tree (Luke 13:6-9) is meant as a warning to the people of Israel to repent (Luke 13:3, 5), and the cursing of the fig tree in Jesus' final week (Matt. 21:18-20) is often seen as a parabolic miracle of God's rejection of his people for their rejection of his Messiah. And the parable of the wicked husband-men (based very clearly on Isaiah 5) closes with the definite message: "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing fruits of it" (Matt. 21:43).

#### IV

Furthermore, to see the text in Hebrews as referring basically to the people of God as a community rather than to individual believers is not so strange—in fact, it would seem to be the only interpretation which adequately fits the entire context and flow of thought. The writer introduces Hebrews 3 and 4 with the *oikos* concept, one which views God's people as a community.<sup>11</sup> His whole explication of Psalm 95 deals with God's relationship to his whole covenant people in the wilderness and how they as a group hardened their hearts against the Lord. Then in Heb.

<sup>10</sup> There are quite a few commentators who associate the reference to thorns and curse with Gen. 3:17-18, the cursing of the ground with thorns at the time of man's fall into sin. However, what these writers have failed to realize is the difference in perspective here. In Genesis 3, the thorns come as a result of the curse; in Hebrews 6 (and Isaiah 5), the curse comes as a result of the thorns.

<sup>11</sup> Note how Isaiah 5:7 states that the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house, the *oikos* (I,XX) of Israel.

5:11-6:3, the immediate context for 6:4-6, we see very clearly that the reference is to the community of God's covenant people to whom he is writing. As a group, they are not able to bear the solid food of the Word; however, he is going to give it to them anyway, and encourages them to grasp its full significance and to press on to maturity lest something terrible happen to them—note how 6:4 begins with *gar*. This warning is meaningful only if we understand it as applicable to the group of Hebrew Christians as a whole.

I recognize that 6:1-3 uses the first person plural, 6:4-6 the third person plural, and 6:9ff. the second person plural. Thus some contend that in 6:4-6 the writer is speaking in abstract terms, in generalities. But we must always remember that throughout the book he gives warnings and exhortation intended for *his readers*, for that group of Hebrew Christians. Heb. 6:4-6 is not being addressed to some nebulous, unspecified group of people. To take it seriously as part of the letter requires us to view it as being addressed to and applicable to this community of believers, the church which is the recipient of this letter. He gives them a very serious warning in Heb. 6:4-6 about the dangerous results of apostasy; then he goes on to back this up with an Old Testament warning (Isaiah 5 and Deuteronomy 11, 28-30). However, he is quite confident things have not yet deteriorated to that point of covenant rejection by God for he knows "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" (6:10). Then he goes on to encourage them to persevere and be imitators of those who did inherit the covenant promises (6:12). In other words, the writer is not so much interested in each separate individual as he is in the congregation as a whole. Where he does address the individual, he addresses him, also in Old Testament manner, as standing within the covenant community.

#### V

Before going any further, one thing must be made clear: When I speak here of the community, I do *not* mean the entire, world-wide covenant community. The New Testament, for example, speaks of the world-wide church as Christ's body in Eph. 1:23, 5:23 and Col. 1:18, 24. But it also speaks of a local congregation as "the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27). Unfortunately, the New Testament does not clearly depict the relationship between these two—perhaps we can use the words *macrocosm* and

microcosm to depict that relationship. Thus when speaking of corporate rejection by God, we must recognize that it can apply as surely to a more limited corporate body as it can to the total one. For example, in the New Testament we find a reference to the possibility of the corporate rejection of a church as a unit in Rev. 2:5, 3:3, 16. The rejection of Ephesus, Sardis and Laodicea is the rejection of local church units—the singular pronouns and *se* is used in all cases. For example, "I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent" (Rev. 2:5). The church is viewed here not as an aggregate of individuals, but as a corporate unit, and Christ's rejection of it is not first of all a rejection of many individuals but of a corporate entity. This is the sort of warning contained in Hebrews—a warning to that particular local Christian community that if she becomes apostate as a church, God will reject her community.<sup>12</sup>

## VI

Once we see the communal perspective in Hebrews, especially in 6:4 and examine the Old Testament background regarding the dealings of God with his people, this passage becomes understandable. For time and again the Old Testament repeats warnings of what God will do to the people Israel should they become apostate—he will reject his people, destroy them and raise up a new people for himself. And in the history of the Old Testament, once God had made his decision to send forth his hand of judgment against Israel for their iniquity, his decision was unalterable. Despite all the blessings that they as a people had received despite their having tasted of the heavenly gifts and the Word of God through the prophets (to use the language of Heb. 6), Israel turned to false gods, became apostate, and God sent his scathing judgment against his whole people. In this same way God dealt with his people in the New Testament, as the parable of the wicked husbandmen indicates. Because of their refusal to produce the proper fruits, God is going to reject them

<sup>12</sup> As an analogy, we might refer to church history, where throughout the ages, when individual churches have become apostate, they appear to have been subsequently rejected by God; thereafter they have either disintegrated and lost their character as churches, or they have become little more than social clubs. At the same time, God has raised up new churches as his covenant people to continue his work.

as his people and their seasons" (Rev. 21:41).

We must also emphasize here that whether or not every member of the community of God in the New Testament is rejected is beside the point. In fact, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament examples of covenant rejection, a remnant is preserved. In the Old Testament, the remnant returns from the exile to the Promised Land. In the New Testament, the disciples and the other Jewish followers of Christ formed the remnant who became the church. Even in passages referred to above, Christ states explicitly that not each and every individual in a church is lost: In the case of Sardis he clearly says, "you have still a few names in Sardis who have not soiled their garments and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy" (Rev. 3:12). But in none of these cases does this reduce the impact of the message to the congregation of God's people—the warning that if the large majority of members become apostate, God will reject them as a corporate unit.

In a sense, the view of the kind of argumentation often found in the book of Hebrews can very easily see what type of warning is being issued. In Hebrews 6:1-4, for instance, we read that if the Old Testament message was not understood and every transgression received just retribution, how much more serious would be the message spoken by the Lord himself be taken seriously. Similarly, then, casting an eye to Isaiah 5 and God's dealings with his people here, the writer implies that there is much more reason to warn the church of the New Testament against repeating Israel's apostasy; if the church does not heed the warning, the fate will befall them and there will be no further chance for repentance.

## VII

It is in this light that I wish to understand the most crucial word here, the word "impossible," *adunaton*. This word is used four times in Hebrews: 6:4, 6:18, 10:4 and 11:6. First it must be noted, as Solari maintains, that "In none of these cases does the word mean merely difficult, but it always denotes at least a moral impossibility."<sup>13</sup> Secondly, the normal construction for this word is with the accusative plus the infinitive, where the accusative functions as the subject which cannot possibly do

<sup>13</sup> Solari, *The Problem of Metanoia*, p. 75.

the action expressed in the infinitive. Thus we read in Heb. 10:4 that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins; and, again, in Heb. 6:18 that it is impossible for God to lie. In the case of Heb. 11:6, "without faith it is impossible to please God," the subject of the infinitive is not expressed, so we must go to the context to find out what it might be. The writer has just spoken of Enoch (vs. 5); here he generalizes that he who would come near to God and please him as Enoch did cannot do so without faith. Hence we can supply the subject from the context: For without faith it is impossible for one who comes to God to please Him.

In our text (6:4) we read, "it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who fall away." As with 11:6, the subject of the infinitive "to restore to repentance" is not expressed and we must go to the context to find it. The previous verse offers two possible agents: *theon* or *hemas*, "God" or "us." If we accept God as the subject of the infinitive, the writer would be saying that it is impossible for God to restore to repentance those who fall away. This goes contrary to the entire message of the Bible, which testifies of a God with whom all things are possible (e.g., Matt. 19:26, Mark 10:27, Luke 18:27, all of which record Jesus' response to the question, "Who then can be saved?") Solari does not cite any biblical expositor who interprets Hebrews 6 to be saying that some men are so hardened that not even God can soften their hardened hearts. It is true that there are those whom God has given up on and rejected, but certainly it is *possible* for him to draw them to himself (Rom. 11:23).

The other option, then, is to see *hemas*, "us," as the subject of "to restore to repentance": It is impossible for us to restore to repentance those who have fallen away. Indeed, when we understand this text in its historical-redemptive setting with Isaiah 5 in the background, it becomes very plain why we cannot renew them to repentance: If God has decided, as he did with Israel in the Old Testament and with the Jewish nation in the New Testament, to reject that community of believers as his special people because of their perpetual apostasy, there is nothing man can do to reverse that decision. Indeed this is the agonizing frustration of Paul in Romans 9, that God has chosen to harden the Jewish people and it is thus impossible for him (Paul) to renew them to repentance.<sup>14</sup> The writer to

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 6 makes it clear how frustrating the situation would be to Isaiah the prophet. God has all but given up on his people; he sends Isaiah to bring God's word as a prophet, but Isaiah has been told that his preaching will fall on deaf ears. "Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?' And he said, 'Till cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without men, and

the Hebrews, it appears, is issuing the same covenant warning, this time to a local congregation of believers as a covenant community: Do not fall into apostasy and produce thorns instead of fruit, because God's patience runs out and he will turn his back upon you as he did on Israel. And when that decision is made, there is nothing (*adunaton*) man can do to alter it—to call them to repentance. They crucify the Son of God afresh, and their situation is like those who crucified the Son of God the first time—the wicked husbandmen whom God rejected to give the promises and blessings of the covenant to a people who would produce fruits.

### VIII

Probably the major problem to this communal interpretation of Hebrews 6 rises not so much from Hebrews 6 as from the repeated warning in Hebrews 10:26-39. Here, it would seem, the primary focus is on the individual and not on the covenant community as a whole: "How 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?"

In answer to this objection, there are several things to be pointed out. First, the *primary* focus in this whole section beginning with Heb. 10:19 is, as in Heb. 6, on the community as a group. The immediate pericope beginning with Heb. 10:26 speaks of a warning to that total community: "If we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there is no longer remaining a sacrifice for sins," and ends with Heb. 10:39 (like Heb. 6:9ff.): "But we are not of them that shrink back into perdition, but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul."

Secondly, the basis for this warning to the individual is given, introduced also by *gar*: "The Lord will judge his people" (10:30). These two texts both come from the book of Deuteronomy, where Moses is giving God's covenant message to Israel through his final song (32:35-36). God, particularly in the second text quoted, is addressing his people as a whole; this calls to mind the similar references in Heb. 6 to Deuteronomy (11:26-28 as well as most of chh. 28-30) mentioned above.

Thirdly, we need to realize that there was room for divine judgment of

the land is utterly desolate, and the Lord removes men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land" (Is. 6:12-13). Isaiah's only comfort is the assurance, which Paul also has, that a remnant will remain.

individuals within the community in the Old Testament. We find provisions for this both in the warning given in Deut. 29:18-21 (part of the passage looked at earlier) and in the case history of Achan. But this in no way nullifies the fact that the primary focus of the blessing-curse passages is on Israel as a whole. The judgment of the individual takes place within the broader context of the covenant community.

Finally, the Septuagint of Isaiah 5 has a very enlightening phrase. The Hebrew text of Is. 5:7 says: "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting." However, the Septuagint puts the second of these also in the singular: "but the man (*anthropos*) of Judah is his beloved new planting." Space does not permit going into the whole corporate personality and corporate solidarity theme in the Old and New Testaments. But is it possible that the thinking of the writer of the Hebrews is so shaped by the perspective of the Septuagint on Isaiah 5 that, when he quotes the Old Testament law that "a man who has violated the law of Moses died without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses," he applies this text to "the man of Judah," that is, to Judah as a whole? With the rest of this passage (and the entire book) so corporately oriented, we must accept that as a real possibility.

## IX

It is somewhat along this line, I feel, that Berkouwer explicates Hebrews 6:4-6. His total focus of attention is, correctly, not on the individual Christian but upon the church as a corporate body, as a covenant community. Hence in his view the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews is here exhorting the church to choose the only way she may go—in the direction of service to her Master.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews does not offer a view concerning the apostasy of the saints, but he comes with his earnest admonition to the endangered Church and calls her to keep the faith and to avoid all toying in her thoughts with possibilities to the right or to the left.<sup>15</sup>

Hebrews 6:4-6 undoubtedly is and will always remain a difficult passage to understand, particularly in the light of God's promise of the

<sup>15</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, tr. by Robert Knudsen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 120.

preservation of the saints. There is a mystery here; no one can fail to recognize that. The criticism may legitimately be leveled against the view defended in this article that we have merely pushed the problem one step back: If the passage does not deal with the possibility of the rejection of an individual believer, it does deal with the problem of the rejection of an elect church, an elect community. How God can choose a covenant community for himself and then reject her is indeed a mystery. But at least the mystery seen in this manner in Hebrews is not one which is unique here in the Scriptures (which it would be if the focus of attention were on individual election). It is the mystery Paul struggles with in Romans 9-11: How can God be rejecting his own elect people, the nation who brought forth the Messiah and had the word of the prophets? It is the mystery that underlies the message of God to several of the *churches* of Asia Minor in Revelation, as in Rev. 2:5: "Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent."

Thus even today the warning must go out: As God's people we must continue to produce fruits worthy of repentance—not only as individuals but as churches, as elect communities. We must do so lest he turn his back on us, destroy us as thorns are left to be burned and create a new people who will produce such fruits. If God ever makes that decision, his judgment is unalterable. The writer, as Berkouwer states, is not trying to disturb and threaten our assurance of salvation; he is giving us as the church "an admonition, whose purpose is to lead [us] to a more secure walk in the way of salvation."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.