

## **PART V**

### **PROMINENT VIEWS OF THE BOOK OF HEBREWS**

#### **Two Views: Majority View and Minority View**

The Book of Hebrews has been interpreted variously through the years. However, most interpretations land in one of two views. Probably the largest difference between the two prominent views is:

- the readers are a mixed group of believers and unbelievers.
- the readers are all believers, but some are wavering in their belief

#### **The Majority View: Mixed Group (Believers and Unbelievers)**

The majority view is that of a mixed group of believers and unbelievers. They would hold that the unbelievers in the church were professors of Christ, but had not actually truly trusted in Him. Thus, if they left the church and returned to Israel (apostasy), it demonstrated that they were not true Christians and had never truly trusted.

These typically hold the doctrine called the “perseverance of the saints.” This is a doctrine that states that true believers will always endure faithful to Christ, and could never abandon Christ. If they do, it shows they were never believers. Thus, the warning passages are for the unbelievers in the audience, since they are the only ones who have the potential of leaving.

#### **The Minority View: Readers are Believers**

The minority view is that the audience consists of only believers. Some however, are considering abandoning Christ, called apostasy. This group typically holds for eternal security, meaning that if one is saved, then they are always saved (“once saved, always saved”).<sup>16</sup> Thus they would hold that the warning passages are concerning the loss of future rewards in the kingdom as well as suffer various difficulties presently (e.g., discipline).

While the view of this author is that the readers were true believers, there are major differences between how this commentator comes to his view and others who hold the same view that these are believers. Probably the largest difference is the presence of the Nation, Israel, as the antagonist and the use of the Old Testament Scriptures to define the problem and the solution. Too often the book is quickly related to the contemporary audience for application,

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<sup>16</sup> Obviously, there are other views that include “loss of salvation,” but those are not considered here since they are held by those not in our doctrinal circles, and are not, in this professor’s view, not in the least viable.

and thus neglects the historical nature of the problem, and the specific nature of Israel's involvement in the book.

It should be noted that the views considered here are only those who hold that if a person is truly saved, then they have eternal security (which this commentator holds). The majority view agrees with this, but states that if a person rejects Christ, then he was never saved. The minority view holds that they are believers and while they reject, they will still be in the Kingdom.

### **The Problem: Two Views**

Each view is characterized by a different perception of the problem.

#### **The Majority View: Unbelievers Coming Short of Salvation**

The first view, with the majority of adherents, identifies the readers of the book as a mixed group. That is, there are some true believers in the assembly, but there are those who have not made the commitment of trusting in Jesus as the Christ. They were seemingly drawn by the miracles that may have gone on in the early days through the apostles, but now are tempted to leave the assembly and return to Israel, which would indicate they were never saved.

However, since the church was being persecuted and suffering, they were leaving the church (10:29), never having fully trusted in the Christ. The author then writes them to tell them to move on to salvation and trust Christ, and warns them of dire consequences (6:4-6, 10:26-30) should they fail to cross over into true Christianity.

The consequence of this view is that the dire warning passages apply only to those who are considering salvation, but have not actually attained it. Therefore believers are not being warned, only the unbelievers.

The adherents of this view hold that the threat is variable. It may be that these professing (or almost) believers are lured back to the world by sensual activities and if they do, it shows they were never saved. Others hold that it is apostasy in view here, and again, if these professing believers return, they were never saved.

(Comment: One of the main difficulties with this view is that of creating a category of unbelievers that "come close" but then reject. Hebrews 6:4-6 points out these can never be brought back to repentance. Yet that would create a category of unbelievers who, if they don't come to Christ, would be in a special, dire, situation. Yet many, many, unbelievers reject Christ all the time and upon later invitations come to Christ. And if that is the case, every time an unbeliever rejects Christ he is in apostasy and can never repent. This, of course, is very inconsistent since rejection is a common, and expected, occurrence. Further, it is difficult to understand the "apostasy" of an unbeliever. Since they have never been a Christian, they have

nothing to commit apostasy about, nothing to “fall away” from. In this view, it would seem that every unbeliever who rejects Christ would be an apostate . . . a category that would be large indeed.

### **The Minority View: Believers Considering Returning to Israel, Abandoning Christ**

The second view, with a minority of adherents, identifies the readers of the letter as all believers. However, they are being persecuted and/or lured by other things, and are thinking of leaving the assembly. The reason for which they are leaving varies from the temptations of the world all the way to the apostasy of the believer.

The feeling of those who hold this view is varied. Most hold that the epistle is concerned about their return to sensual activities of the world, but some hold it is apostasy that is in view. Therefore, the author urges them to maturity (reject the world’s activities) or to endurance in suffering for Christ (reject apostasy of returning to Israel).

The warning passages are to tell them they will lose eschatological rewards and/or present difficulties (e.g., discipline).

### **Difficulties with Each View**

While this presentation agrees in part with some of the things said, to debate and interact at the theological level, or the proof text level, would defeat the ability of a proper hermeneutic approach to solve the problem of the purpose of the epistle. Thus, a comparison will not ensue, but a study of the epistolary literature and how it breaks down so as to communicate clearly the purpose of the author.

### **Wrong (or missing) Antagonist:**

Probably the biggest error in interpreting the book is to not identify the antagonist in the book. Most interpreters see the believer as simply fighting his own lust to sin without any named and personally conflicting antagonist. Thus, the book has is interpreted without defining a specific historical problem in the church itself. They do not see anyone attacking the church, other than personal internal problems of each believer. Thus, the book is taken to be written to identify unbelievers in the assembly so that they might become believers, or to identify carnal believers so that they might move on into a maturity of sanctification.

They do not see the issue of “suffering for Messiah” as the critical theological issue as well as the practical. They change this out for the typical carnal sins of the world and thus lose the absolute serious nature of the historical antagonist and his theology. The lack of understanding that there is an antagonist in the book requires the interpreter to apply many verses

to the reader, that are actually referencing the Nation Israel. This incurs difficulties in the warning passages and elsewhere.

### **Wrong Application, Wrong Definitions**

Frequently the proponents of both views misunderstand the definitions used by the author, and thus propose that there is something less than apostasy as the main problem. For instance, the use of the term *telios* (and its various forms) in the last part of Hebrews 5 and beginning of Hebrews 6 is misunderstood by the translators and the interpreters as well. It is variously translated as “perfect,” “complete,” or “mature.” When it references Jesus in 5:9, it translates it “perfect” or “complete.” When the same base word is used for the believer in 5:14 and 6:1, it translates it as “mature.” Thus, due to the mistranslation and interpretation, the emphasis for the believer is some sort of “spiritual maturity,” which normally is thought to be engaging in good works and avoiding the sins of sensuality. Thus, the warning is taken to mean that one should give up the world’s lusts and become saved (the majority view), or simply become a better Christian by giving up the world’s lusts (the minority view).

Yet when seen in its original meaning where the words for Christ are the words for the believer, that is “complete.” It is clearly noticed that Christ became complete by the faithfulness (“obedience”) through suffering. Thus the believer becomes complete as well by enduring faithfully through suffering for Christ.

Thus, the application for the believer is consistently to endure and be faithful in suffering. The alternative is to follow the antagonist and abandon Christ to avoid the suffering.

When these things are taken into account, it is clear that the believers in Christ are in sight in this epistle (Minority View), but differing from that view the application is primarily around enduring suffering for Christ and not considering abandonment (apostasy).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hebrews 13:1-5 gives imperatives that might seem to endorse a view that something less than apostasy is in mind as the warning. However, it should be noticed that there are two things going on in these verses. The primary one is the regard for one’s brother which is the support, and encouragement that must go on in the church. The other is the regard for the revelation and those who bring it, a very important issue with regard to faithfulness to the truth of God.