

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: **STUDIES IN HEBREWS**

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Text: **Heb. 2:1 - 4; II Tim. 4:1 - 5**

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PERILOUS TIMES AHEAD

It used to be the case that apologetics had to do with defending the faith to those *outside* the faith. While this still remains the primary purpose of apologetics, a new situation has arisen—that of defending and contending for the historic Christian faith with those *Evangelical* Christians who have abandoned the old paths in order to skip merrily along the yellow brick road of post-modernism. I took stock of the rise of what goes by the name “Postmodern Evangelicalism” in my series, “The Present Evangelical Crisis” (Summer 2005). One of the trends that has gained a foot hold in Evangelicalism is what I would call *cafeteria* Christianity—Christians picking and choosing what appeals to them not only in what is available from among the various denominations, but from among *other* faiths. Eclecticism is now in vogue. A little of this, a little of that. Why limit yourself to just one tradition? Designer *spirituality* is the way to go. “Religion has become a bit of a dirty word,” said George Gallup Jr., a Princeton, NJ based religion pollster. “It sounds dead, old fashioned, archaic. Spirituality is a safer word. If you can say you are spiritual, you don’t have to make a commitment. For a lot of people, it’s a way out.”¹ This widening of religious choice has produced a syncretic hybrid and has had a detrimental effect on the importance of theology in Evangelical circles. “One way to understand American religion and chart its future,” Richard Cimino and Don Lattin write in *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium*, their 1998 survey, “is to see the world of faith like any other product or service in the U.S. economy.” Hence, the mega-churches that model themselves on shopping malls and corporate offices so as to lure “clients,” as worshippers are now called. “Servicing our customers...continues to be a core mission,” says the Dallas based Leadership Network, a pioneer in the church consulting industry.” This new paradigm is not centered in theology.”² Culture critic Gene Edward Veith astutely observes, “This downplaying of doctrine and objective thinking helps explain why 53 percent of Evangelical Christians can believe that there are no absolutes (as compared to 66 percent of Americans as a whole). Certainly, the Evangelical tradition has always cultivated the emotions and stressed an experiential religion, as opposed to mere *head knowledge*. This openness to personal feelings and experience is a point of contact with postmodernism, which has gone on to exaggerate the role of subjectivity beyond anything that a *hot gospeler* of the nineteenth century would ever recognize. Similarly, Evangelicals have tended to emphasize the role of choice in salvation. People are urged to make a *decision for Christ*, a commitment regularly described as a function of the human will. This terminology corresponds well to the postmodernist mindset, which understand religion and morality in terms of choice, not truth.”³ George Barna, who was the leading voice in getting churches to adopt a “market strategy” for church growth has recently done a 180°—his most recent book is decidedly *anti-church*. He claims this is the most important book he has ever written and one that people will point back to in the years ahead as a milestone book of tremendous significance (he’s not very modest). Basically, he urges Christians to become “Revolutionaries” or “Lone-Rangers” i.e. be your own “personal church.” (No pastors, no board of elders, no authority.) These “churchless Christians,” Barna proudly predicts will be the vast majority of believers by the year 2020. Barna is simply reflecting our cultural mindset with its anti-institutionalism, anti-authoritarianism and with its strong individualistic stance that has so much appeal to our sense of independence. This is perhaps best summarized in Frank Sinatra’s song, “I Did It My Way.”⁴ The Bible describes this sad state of affairs in terms of *drifting*. Evangelicals who display an attitude of

careless indifference to theology need to realize that theology as such is *never* merely a theoretical exercise that is unrelated to the realities of life. Theology in a very real sense is and must be intensely practical and therefore full of intense seriousness.

I. WARNING: THE PERIL OF DRIFTING

This is the first of a series of admonitory passages, which are interspersed throughout the epistle (cf. 3:12 – 4:3; 4:14-16; 5:11-6:8; 10:32-39; 12:3-17; 12:25-29). The first warning sets the tone for the ones that follow. The Hebrews had demonstrated an attitude of careless indifference. Their interest in the specific doctrines of the Christian faith had slackened noticeably. They were in danger of “drifting off course.” Two nautical terms are found in 2:1. The first, *PROSECHEIN* translated “pay more careful attention,” (NIV) means to hold a ship towards port. It indicates the fastening of the anchors to the seabed to keep the ship from drifting (the same metaphor of an anchor occurs in 6:19). The second term, *PARARUOMEN* translated, “drift away” in the NIV. The thought is that of negligence or carelessness, of being asleep at the wheel. Bishop Westcott notes, “The idea is not that of simple forgetfulness, but of being swept along past the sure anchorage which is within reach...the image is singularly expressive. We are all continuously exposed to the action of currents of opinion, habit, action, which tend to carry us away insensibly from the position which we ought to maintain.”⁵ When we drift we lose sight of advice and wisdom. “The image of a drifting ship, carried by the current beyond a fixed point, furnished a vivid metaphor for the failure to keep a firm grip on the truth through carelessness and lack of concern.”⁶

II. REASONING FROM THE LESSER

What is the antidote for this perilous condition? The author urges his readers to pay *careful attention* to those doctrinal truths they had once heard, but had neglected.⁷ To drive this point home he uses a Hebraic style of argument known as *QAL WA HOMER* (lit. light and heavy).⁸ This line of reasoning says that if something is true in a light or lesser matter, it is true in a heavy or greater matter as well. If the consequences of ignoring the message mediated by angels met with divine anger, how much more severe will be the punishment for those who ignore the message spoken through the Son of God! This is the *QAL* aspect of the writer’s argument.

III. REASONING FROM THE GREATER

The *heavy* or greater argument (the *HOMER* aspect) assumes the form of a question—“How shall we escape...” and gets its weight from three successive clauses found in vv. 3-4.

- A. That Which Was Announced. This message had as its source the Son of God. “The greatness of this salvation,” writes Delitzsch, “consists in this, that He by whom it was first of all made known is the Lord, not ministering angels.”⁹
- B. That Which Was Confirmed. This message had been *attested*. The word *BEBAIO* means to make firm or steadfast in the sense of convincing. The message of the Son and about the Son was *real* and was shown to be in the experience of those who received it. There is in the message of Christ a power that is self-attesting. It confirms itself in the hearts of those to whom it is applied by the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 1:16; I Cor. 2:12, 13; II Cor. 4:3-6).
- C. That Which Was Testified. This text declares that God *bore witness* to the message by signs, wonders, various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit—this testimony was dynamic. These things, as R. Kent Hughes has pointed out “bore weighty testimony to the authenticity of the work of Christ and the confirming word to those who heard him.”¹⁰ The distinct purpose for these divine signs and wonders was for the confirmation of the truth of the Gospel.¹¹

CONCLUSION: C. S. Lewis once said, “We have to be continually reminded of what we believe. Neither this belief nor any other will automatically remain alive in the mind. It must be fed. And as a matter of fact, if you examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in Christianity, I wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument? Do not most people simply drift

away?”¹² I am convinced that the greatest peril facing the Evangelical Church in the 21st century is that of doctrinal drifting. This is happening in two very different ways. One, doctrinal drifting is occurring *confessionally* in the sense that many Evangelicals are openly disavowing central tenets of historic orthodoxy. Open-view theists, as they are called, contend that God does *not* know the future. Not only is God not omniscient according to these professing Evangelicals, God is not omnipotent or absolutely sovereign. Evangelical publishing houses and organizations actively support and promote this view of God.¹³ Second, and more wide-spread and therefore more dangerous, is the growing influence of the church-growth movement which down-plays doctrinal distinctives and promotes a very vanilla form of Christianity that is rooted in popular culture and takes its cue more from pop-psychology than it does from the Scriptures and the confessions of historic Christianity.¹⁴ In both cases a view of God totally distinct from Scripture is front and center. R. C. Sproul has rightly said, “As far as I am concerned, the greatest issue facing the Christian church as we (enter) the twenty-first century is the character of God. Unless we understand what God is like, nothing else in the Bible will make sense to us if we do not understand why God’s character required it. If you understand the character of God, then the doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine of Christ, and everything else falls into place. On the other hand, everything else can be correct apart from your doctrine of God and you are still a pagan. You are still an idolater. You may be an inerrantist; your eschatology might be right on target; you might never miss a quiet time or an opportunity to go to church. But if you do not worship and serve the *right* God, you worship and serve a *false* one. Therefore, we *must* press on to know the Lord” (Hosea 6:3). “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To whom be the glory forever! Amen.”¹⁵

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ David Gibson, “In the Christian Future, Double-click on God.” *Arizona Republic* (Jan. 23, 2000).
- ² Ibid.
- ³ G.E. Veith, *Postmodern Times* (Crossway, 1994), p. 211.
- ⁴ G. Barna, *Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary* (Tyndale, 2005) and the very perceptive review by Kevin Miller entitled “No Church? No Problem: George Barna Wants Commitment to the Local Church to Sink Lower Than Ever” in *Christianity Today* (Jan. 2006), p. 69.
- ⁵ B.F. Westcott, *The Epistle to The Hebrews* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 37.
- ⁶ W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1991), p. 37.
- ⁷ “Those to whom this letter is addressed are evidently not far from losing their right to be acknowledged as authentic Christians because of a loss of nerve, a failure of application, or, as Chrysostom puts it, a “willful negligence” in practicing the faith they profess. Hence the need for the admonitions repeatedly given in this epistle: “we must pay attention...lest we drift 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); “let us strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience...let us hold fast our confession” (4:11, 14); “you have become dull of hearing...you need someone to teach you again the principles of God’s word” (5:11, 12); “let us leave the elementary doctrines...and go on to maturity” (6:1); “do not throw away your confidence...you have need of endurance” (10:35); “let us lay aside every weight...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (12:1); “lift up your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees” (12:12); “see that you do not refuse him who is speaking” (12:25); “do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings” (13:9). Through sheer apathy they are in grave peril of drifting away from the essentials of the Gospel.” P.E. Hughes, *A Commentary On Epistle to The Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 74.
- ⁸ “The hermeneutical principle *a minore ad maius* (from the lesser to the greater) was originally formulated by Rabbi Hillel (died c. a.d. 20) as *qal wa-homer* (light and heavy). The implication is that particulars that are applicable in the case of minor things certainly hold true for major things. See, for example, Heb. 9:13-14.” S.J. Kistemaker, *Hebrews: New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1984), p. 58.
- ⁹ F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on The Epistle to The Hebrews* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 98.
- ¹⁰ R.K. Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (Crossway, 1993), p. 52.
- ¹¹ “Several things should be noticed in these verses. The ‘signs and wonders and miracles’ spoken of are the same terms used throughout the book of Acts to describe the miraculous workings and ministries of the apostles. The terms *DUNAMIS*, *SEMEION*, and *TERAS* are also used in Romans 15:19 and II Cor. 12:12 to describe Paul’s ministry, and in II Thess. 2:9 to describe the false miracles of the man of sin. Therefore, there is no doubt that this passage refers to miraculous signs such as healing and raising the dead. Mark 16:17-20 places tongues in the same category. I Cor. 14:22 also asserts that tongues are a *sign* to unbelievers. Therefore, tongues as well as healing and other miracles are the signs and wonders spoken of in Heb. 2:3-4. The subject discussed is the salvation which was confirmed to the addressees of the Epistle by those who actually heard the Lord. They were eyewitnesses of the Lord and were therefore the first generation

of Christians. God bore witness together with them (*sunepimartuountos*) by the miraculous signs. This was a thing of the past by the time the Epistle was written. The verb ‘was confirmed’ (*ebebaiothe*) is past (aorist) tense. Apparently this confirmation was not going on at the time of writing. The present tense of the participle, ‘bearing witness,’ relates to the main verb, ‘was confirmed.’ God was not bearing witness at the time Hebrews was written, but He bore witness by the miracles at the past time, when the eyewitnesses testified to the Hebrews.” T.R. Thomas, *Miraculous Gifts* (Loizeau Bros., 1983), p. 269.

¹² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (MacMillan, 1983), p. 124.

¹³ Cf. for example the recent book by Greg A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to The Open View of God* (Baker, 2000). Boyd taught theology at Bethel College, and is an ordained minister in the Baptist General Conference, both the school and the denomination claim to be Evangelical and no action was ever taken against Boyd for teaching this decidedly heretical view of God.

¹⁴ Cf. the excellent analysis of G.A. Pritchard *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Baker, 1996). Pritchard documents in a chapter entitled “The Quagmire of Psychology” the degree to which psychology and not Scripture, controls Willow Creek, *the* model church for those in the church growth movement. “The American psychological worldview is taught in many of the books that are sold at the Willow Creek bookstore. During the year I studied, beside Hybels’ books, the majority of the best-selling books were psychological self-help books. The bookstore staff realized this and stocked the store accordingly. In the bookstore there are three racks of books on the topic of psychology, one rack of books on recovery, and only one rack on theology and church life. Yet when I examined the theology rack, I found hardly any theological titles. Most of the books on the theology rack are church-growth books.” (p. 297)

¹⁵ R.C. Sproul, “The Object of Contemporary Relevance” in *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* Ed. M.S. Horton (Moody, 1992), p. 325.