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NEW LIFE, BETTER LIFE: DEVELOPING A MODEL
FOR CHURCH REVITALIZATION FROM
THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

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NEW LIFE, BETTER LIFE: DEVELOPING A MODEL
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To Jennifer,
Of all the words I could say,
there are two you most deserve
—thank you.

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PREFACE

I began my doctoral studies for one simple reason, to become better equipped to shepherd the church. I hoped to attain greater biblical knowledge and more tools for ministry. I had no idea I would be challenged so deeply in my own philosophy of ministry, nor did I expect to be so inspired by the people around me who love God's word so sincerely.

I remember the first day of my first seminar. As I sat in a room with five other students and listened to them talk theology, I realized I was about to be sharpened not only by my professors, but also by my new peers. I quickly became close friends with my classmates, and I continue to be both challenged and encouraged each time I speak with them.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to our professors, who taught me by word and deed what it looks like to be enthralled by Scripture. It has been a great privilege just to observe these men as they sought to love the Lord, not just with their hearts and souls, but also with their minds. Their passion for God's Word is contagious. After one particularly engaging lesson on the book of Mark, I asked the professor (who is also a pastor), "Does your congregation love hearing you exposit Scripture as much as I do?" I'll never forget his response: "Yes, they do. Human beings love to behold that which is beautiful, and if you can show your congregation the beauty of God's Word, they will not be able to get enough of it." His words have been a guiding light in my ministry ever since.

As a pastor, I knew God would use my doctoral studies to edify my congregation. I did not expect them to edify my family. As I progressed through my

program, my wife, Jennifer, began asking more and deeper questions about theology. I would answer her, or we would look up answers together in Scripture, and her hunger for God's Word continued to grow. Over the course of a couple of years, the Lord began to work on her heart, and she eventually enrolled in seminary as well. She is now working on a Master of the Arts in Theological Studies. Her mind has come alive as she studies under some of the same professors I had, and she continues to grow in her love for the Lord.

I am grateful to Jennifer for her loving patience and support through these years. She has stood beside me and encouraged me when school seemed to be more of a burden than a blessing. I am grateful to our two children, Levi and Phoebe, who have also suffered this process with me. I pray that one day they will understand why Dad had to work so hard while they were young. I am grateful to the two churches I have pastored during this process. Hebron Baptist allowed me to begin the program and encouraged me until God called me away. Eastern Hills Baptist saw me through to the end of the program. The support of these churches and their people means more to me than they will ever know. I am grateful to my classmates, Adam, Andy, Chad, and Dave. We've been through much together and they are my brothers. Lastly, I am grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Sam Emadi whose firm but caring words forced me to think beyond my capabilities.

I began my doctoral studies so I would be better equipped to shepherd the church. Over the last three years, that desire has not changed. What has changed is my understanding of what it means to shepherd the church. I know now more than ever that the shepherd's job is to feed the sheep. The church needs to feast on Scripture. The church needs to move on to spiritual maturity. The church needs to behold God's Word as beautiful.

Josh Wootton

Montgomery, Alabama

May 2020

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The North American Mission Board reports that even though the number of church plants within the Southern Baptist Convention have increased, baptisms, giving, and attendance has steadily declined. Dwindling numbers and a lack of commitment have left many church leaders scrambling for a solution.¹ In light of this evidence, leading voices within the evangelical and Southern Baptist community have posited various solutions to this crisis. Some argue that the best way forward is to regain past religious and denominational traditions, trusting that these methods will once again grow churches just as they did in previous decades.² Others, however, posit that that best way forward is a complete abandonment of old traditions and replacement with new ones.³ However, a

¹ The North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention engages in a concentrated effort of church planning and replanting. As more and more churches are planted across the nation, however, total membership, baptisms, worship attendance, and giving have decreased. Some large SBC and non-denominational churches seem to have found an answer to the church growth problem with their seeker-engaging concentration, but recent years have shown the model to be difficult to sustain for many pastors. Mark Driscoll, Perry Noble, Darrin Patrick, and Tullian Tchividjian are a few examples of those who were not able to maintain leadership in these kinds of churches. When it comes to breathing new life into the American church, solutions seem to evade the experts. See NAMB, “Annual Ministry Report,” accessed January 10, 2108, <https://www.namb.net/about/annualreport>; Carol Pipes, “ACP: Churches Up in 2016; Baptisms, Membership Decline,” *Baptist Press*, June 8, 2017, <http://www.bpnews.net/49005/acp--churches-up-in-2016-baptisms-membership-decline>.

² An example of this kind of thinking can be found in the 2012 scare that Southern Baptists would stop using the “sinner’s prayer.” The controversy did not center around Christ as the only means of salvation, but focused on the possible loss of a Baptist tradition. See Ted Olsen, “Southern Baptists Debate the Sinner’s Prayer,” *Christianity Today*, June 20, 2012, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/juneweb-only/baptists-sinners-prayer.html>.

³ Perry Noble, former pastor of NewSpring Church, had the praise band play AC/DC’s “Highway to Hell” at their Easter service in 2009. His rationale for completely abandoning a traditional Easter service was that his actions reach more non-believers. See Katherine Weber, “Perry Noble No Regret Over Playing AC/DC ‘Highway to Hell’ for Easter Service: ‘I’d Do It Again—But Better!’,” *Christian Post*, March 25, 2016, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/perry-noble-megachurch-ac-dc-highway-to-hell-easter-160107/>.

lack of a Christ-centered view of these traditions can prevent either philosophy of ministry from resulting in true kingdom growth.

The book of Hebrews demonstrates that church revitalization is not merely a matter of replacing an antiquated model for something more novel or vice-versa. Instead the author of Hebrews models an apostolic pattern of church revitalization—one committed to the priority of discipleship and theological training. Every philosophy of ministry is rooted in ultimate theological commitments. The Hebrew congregation was failing to fulfill God's purposes for them due to their erroneous theological commitments regarding the significance of the Old Covenant and their place in redemptive history. The author of Hebrews indicts his audience for following Old Covenant traditions that were obsolete given Christ's inauguration of the New Covenant. The arrival of this covenant required the Hebrews to reorient their philosophy of ministry and their lives around Christ's fulfillment of Israel's history. This congregation needed to move past 'spiritual milk' and develop a congregational life and ministry built on New Covenant theological commitments. In the same way, modern churches need to jettison any philosophies of ministry inconsistent with their privileged and unique place in redemptive history. The author of Hebrews demonstrates how to transition these congregations and change their practices. By discipling the Hebrew congregation and demonstrating how Christ fulfilled the law, the author of Hebrews provides a model of revitalization by applying the metanarrative of Scripture to the unique ecclesial problems of his congregation. It is a call to step away from an Old Covenant view of tradition and see the messianic fulfillment of Jesus in every practice of the church. It is a call for religious reform, for revitalization.

The aim of this project is to unpack the author of Hebrews' approach to revitalization. Each sermon is designed to lead the congregation toward a Christ-centered philosophy of ministry according to the following steps: First, I will expound on a passage's treatment of the original audience's misunderstanding of Old Covenant tradition. Second, I will show how the theological error of the Hebrews mirrors, in some

way, my congregation's erroneous theological assumptions and how these errors have led to a bad philosophy of ministry in each situation. Third, I will expose Christ as both the fulfilment of the misunderstood Old Covenant tradition and , correspondingly, how a right understanding of biblical theology helps correct my own congregation's ministry practices. For example, sermon four, "A Better Sanctuary," will first expound on the author of Hebrew's message that Christ's status as high priest makes earthly sanctuaries significant only insofar as they point toward a heavenly sanctuary. A connection will then be made between the audience of Hebrews and the current congregation by showing that modern church buildings are often treated as if they are a Most Holy Place. As a result, my congregation often overvalues the church as a building rather than recognizing that the true dwelling place of God is his people. Finally, the sermon will expose the New Covenant Christ as the *telos* of the Old Covenant sanctuary and how this theological conviction shapes our understanding of modern church buildings. For instance, I will show that a building is not unimportant, but is only important insofar as it is used as a tool to help people understand that God dwells now with his people who have access to the heavenly sanctuary through Christ. Author-oriented exegesis and Biblical theology will be used to properly unpack and apply the passages in the modern context.

What Is Biblical Theology?

In pointillism, an artist uses tiny dots scattered across a canvas to create a greater design or image. The artist pays attention to each dot individually, making sure it serves a unique purpose. Each dot also expresses a more significant whole. Similarly, each book of the Bible stands on its own while also contributing to the greater picture of the Bible. This kind of overarching view is exactly what biblical theology provides. The book of Hebrews has a unique theological contribution but we only see the fullness of its contribution when it is viewed in relation to the rest of the Bible. Biblical theology allows this individual viewing of Hebrews and its contribution to the metanarrative picture of the Bible.

Defining Biblical Theology

The term “biblical theology” carries with it different connotations. Some see it as a specific movement of biblical interpretation from the 1950s that was punctuated by humanistic theology.⁴ To others, the term describes the theology of particular contributors to Scripture, such as the theology of John, or Paul, for example. There are others who see biblical theology simply as a theology that is in accordance with the Bible.⁵ These different viewpoints can be further broken down into a spectrum of biblical theology. This spectrum begins with an academic theology that focuses entirely on the historical setting of the biblical authors. It ends with a church-led theology that references historical context but is primarily concerned with modern application. In between these two poles are various mixtures of theory and praxis, academy and church.⁶ Brian Rosner defines biblical theology as, “theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyze and synthesize the Bible’s teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible’s overarching narrative and Christocentric focus.”⁷ Jim Hamilton provides a more streamlined definition of biblical theology as “[embracing] the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors.”⁸ Both of these definitions are valuable

⁴ In 1961, Langdon Gilkey explained a sect of liberalism known as biblical theology that had become popular in the previous decade. Theologians at the time expended their energy in repudiating liberal ideas on God’s universal intervention and did not repudiate liberal ideas on God’s control of natural space-time. This allowed to exist within biblical theology a concept that claimed God’s voice and action throughout the Bible should not always be viewed as literal. This vein of biblical theology saw the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, as a record of the religious interpretation of the Hebrews. Gilkey made this comment of the era: “Thus while the language of biblical theology is God-centered, the whole is included with gigantic parentheses marked ‘human religion.’” This biblical theology was part orthodox, part humanistic. See Langdon B. Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language,” *The Journal of Religion* 41, no. 3 (July 1961): 194-97.

⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 25-26

⁶ Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 21-25.

⁷ B. S. Rosner et al., eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), s.v. “biblical theology.”

⁸ James M. Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 15.

and demonstrate that biblical theology must emerge from exegesis and from recognizing that the final arbiter in matters of hermeneutics is Scripture. Because of the extensive use of the Old Testament in the book of Hebrews, it will be especially beneficial to grasp the interpretive prospective of the author. In order to understand what the author of Hebrews wrote, it is important to understand how he viewed Scripture.

The Purpose of Biblical Theology

In light of the above definition, biblical theology is indispensable. Because the Bible is “breathed out by God,” divinely inspired, it is authoritative and sufficient (2 Tim 3:16–17). Biblical theology provides a means of unfolding redemptive history by allowing us to read each section of history in light of the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).⁹ Each miracle, each piece of wisdom, each hero, each villain, each redemptive act takes its place in the metanarrative of the inspired texts and should be comprehended in view of the Spirit-led intentions of their author.¹⁰ As Michael Lawrence points out, biblical theology allows Christ’s followers to see where the individual designs of salvation fit within the larger tapestry of God’s revelation. This larger revelation is taught and applied in the body of the local church.¹¹ A failure to execute good biblical theology will end in a failure to execute God’s plan for the church. Only when Christ’s followers take seriously the whole counsel of God and rest in its authority and sufficiency will they grow in accordance with his full will and purpose.

⁹ James M. Hamilton, “Biblical Theology and Preaching,” in *Text-Driven Preaching: God’s Word at the Heart of Every Sermon*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David L. Allen, and Ned L. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2010), 194.

¹⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, “Preaching and Biblical Theology,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (2006): 24.

¹¹ Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 181-82.

Biblical Theology and Preaching

Martyn Lloyd-Jones rightfully said the chief end of preaching is “to give men and women a sense of God and his presence.”¹² The Bible, as God’s inspired Word to man, is the primary means by which God has explained himself to mankind. It follows, then, that exposing the fullness of God’s Word to men and women is the best means for conveying his truth. A preached biblical theology provides congregations with the most complete sense of God’s character and his purposes in creation and redemption. It is not enough to simply pick a passage from the Bible and teach it as if it were written in a vacuum. Congregations need to understand how each part of God’s Word is an integral piece of the whole and that the whole clarifies and provides the ultimate context for understanding the part.

For example, when Simeon saw the baby Jesus during his temple dedication he said that this child would be the “fall and rising of many in Israel” (Luke 2:34-35). Without biblical theology a congregation could miss the fact that Simeon was connecting this child to both to Israel’s past and its prophetic future. His words allude to the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 8:14 (see also 1 Cor 1:18). The full meaning of Simeon’s words can only be understood in in light of the rest of Scripture. Biblical Theology teaches those under the preaching of God’s Word that Scripture interprets Scripture and the ultimate context for understanding any passage of Scripture is the entire canon.

The Book of Hebrews in Context

Hamilton states that the purpose of biblical theology is to provide a full picture of the Bible from the beginning to the end.¹³ The book of Hebrews helps do that in and of itself. To study the book properly is an exercise in biblical theology. Because of the background knowledge possessed by the audience, the author of the book purposefully unpacked the Old Testament in light of the arrival of the New Covenant in Christ.

¹² Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 110.

¹³ Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*, 12.

Thomas Schreiner explains, “We won’t truly understand Hebrews unless we see how it relates at least in some fashion to the rest of Scripture.”¹⁴ One of the main features of Hebrews, one that makes it stand out among the other New Testament epistles, is its interpretation of Scripture.

Hebrews begins by expounding on the identity of Jesus Christ by showing how he is the fulfillment of Israel’s Scriptures. Chapters 1–5 are a point-by-point exposition of the nature of Christ. He is God’s living messenger of glory (1:1–4). He is superior to angels (1:5–14) and his salvation should not be neglected (2:1–4). Through his humility, he positioned himself to make propitiation for all men (2:5–18). Christ is superior to both Moses (3:1–6) and Israel (3:7–4:13). He is the High Priest of all (4:14–5:10).

Beginning with 5:11, the author urges his audience toward greater maturity (5:11–6:20). He then further explains the Melchizedekian priesthood (7:1–28). Then he considers the religious traditions of his audience, showing that the practices are empty—obsolete on account of the New Covenant. The author explains that Jesus is the new priest (8:1–6). He inaugurates a better covenant (8:10–13). He is the true sanctuary (9:1–15) and the ultimate sacrifice (9:16–28). Through his death, final absolution is made possible (10:1–18).

From Hebrews 10:19 to the end of the book the author shifts his focus to more practical issues in the life of the Hebrews congregation.¹⁵ Since Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant, the congregation should cherish him and his people, the church (10:19–25). Faith in Christ is one that does not simply rest on tradition but instead pursues purity and good works (10:26–39). This kind of faith was modeled in the lives of

¹⁴ Thomas Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews: Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 20.

¹⁵ Schreiner shows the Greek “ὅτι” to signal a shift in emphasis in this case. See Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 314. Lane agrees with Schreiner and provides further clarity by showing that the word also links the practical issues of this section to the theological issues of the previous one. William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47b (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 282.

Old Testament saints (11:1–40). If they lived in such ways in anticipation of Christ, then the church, that now has Christ, should live so all the more (12:1–29).

The author closes the book with a short barrage of imperatives that are expected among followers of Christ (13:1–17) before offering his epilogue (13:18–25).¹⁶ Thus the book of Hebrews models how to pursue revitalization in a congregation that has erroneous ministry practices built on faulty theological principle.

Most scholars agree that the book of Hebrews serves to motivate the audience to refocus on Christ; a revitalization effort of sorts. One main support for this idea is the argument that “spiritual milk” in Hebrews 5:13 is proposed as an insult. The audience was not simply unprepared for solid spiritual food; they were ready for it but would not take it. The author was shaming them for the fact that they continued to hold on to Old Covenant traditions instead of moving on to the uncompromising truth of the New Covenant Christ.¹⁷ He urged them to turn back to a correct view of the Messiah.¹⁸

Typology in Hebrews

One subset of biblical theology highlighted in Hebrews is typology. The book brings Old Testament “types” into the light and exposes them for their foreshadowing of Christ.¹⁹ For typology to be legitimate it must contain both historical correspondence and escalation, meaning it must involve real people and places, and the antitype (fulfilment)

¹⁶ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47a (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), viii–ix.

¹⁷ This view is supported by F. F. Bruce, William Lane, and Thomas Schreiner. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 108; Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 135; Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 178.

¹⁸ Some people equate the words of the author of Hebrews with those of Paul and Peter in 1 Cor 3:2 and 1 Pet 2:2 respectively. Both apostles refer to spiritual milk in a positive light, as the necessary sustenance for the newly converted. This view is contradictory to the accusatory tone of the author of Hebrews. Therefore, the author of Hebrews must have seen his audience not as new believers who needed the nourishment of spiritual milk but as insubordinate believers who cling to spiritual milk like grown infants. He was calling them to repent and move forward. He was calling for revival. See Donald Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 86.

¹⁹ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 37.

must be a greater expression of the prototype (original).²⁰ There are many examples of this typology throughout Hebrews, but the sermon series for this project is focused on chapters 5–10 so only the typology found in those passages will be discussed.

The most notable example of typology in Hebrews is the Melchizedek priesthood (chaps. 5–7). Melchizedek is the mysterious figure found in Genesis 14. Both historical correspondence and escalation appear in Melchizedek as a type of Christ. Hebrews explains that Melchizedek was called king of Salem, which meant king of peace. Abraham, father of nations, tithed to him as a symbol of submission. Though tithes were meant to be given to the sons of Levi, the priesthood, here was Abraham giving them to someone else. Melchizedek is introduced in the Old Testament without mention of his genealogical right for honor (7:1–10).²¹ The author of Hebrews makes the point that Jesus is the antitype to Melchizedek.²² Melchizedek was the mysterious priest and Jesus is the mysterious High Priest, a means of justification separate from that of the Old Testament Levitical priesthood. The person of Melchizedek pointed toward Christ's ultimate justification through typology. Christ is the king of peace and the one to whom all nations must submit.²³ He, like Melchizedek, had no genealogical right to his priesthood but received it anyway. The author of Hebrews used this typology as a strong tool to show his audience the full scope of biblical truth. He took the two ends of the Bible, Old Testament and New, and tied them together in the fullness of Christ.

The typology in chapters 5–10 builds on itself. The discussion of the Melchizedekian priesthood leads into the explanation of Christ as the High Priest (8:1–

²⁰ Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*, 77.

²¹ The reference draws out the fact that Melchizedek appears in Gen 14 as a king and priest with no genealogical credentials. The author of Hebrews was using the mysterious pedigree of Melchizedek to show the other worldly kingship and priesthood of Christ. See Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 136-37.

²² His assertion is a further affirmation of the Melchizedekian order found in Ps 110.

²³ Some Old Covenant Jews expected two messiahs, an Aaronic priest and a Davidic king. By naming Christ as the antitype of Melchizedek, the author of Hebrews was claiming Christ to be both the messianic priest and messianic king. See Hagner, *Hebrews*, 84.

6),²⁴ which leads into the typological explanation of the New Covenant (8:5–13),²⁵ which leads into the High Priest’s role as a mediator of the New Covenant in the typological sanctuary (9:1–15),²⁶ which leads to the typology of Christ’s sacrifice in the New Covenant sanctuary (9:16–10:4).²⁷

The New Covenant Christ is the antitype of the Old Covenant. This truth is explained in Hebrews 8’s reference to Jeremiah 31:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more (Heb 8:8-12; cf. Jer 31:31-34).

The Old Covenant was given to Moses and written on stone tablets as a national system of religion and government for the Jews. The New Covenant was given through Christ and, by receipt of the Holy Spirit, is written on the hearts of the faithful as a means of reconciliation to the Lord and personal governance for Christ followers. The author of Hebrews explains to his audience that they have the chance to be the victors the Old Testament Jews never were. Through the New Covenant of Christ they might accomplish what old Israel never could.²⁸

G. K. Beale wrote that “the book of Hebrews discusses the tabernacle or temple more than any other New Testament book, except perhaps for John’s

²⁴ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 206.

²⁵ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 208.

²⁶ G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 293.

²⁷ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 242.

²⁸ James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgement* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 518.

Apocalypse.”²⁹ Temple typology reaches all the way back to Genesis and all the way forward into John’s Apocalypse, Revelation. The ornaments of the earthly sanctuary (or temple) mimic the natural landscape of the Garden of Eden and point forward to the perfect Eden which will be the final New Heavens and New Earth. Christ revealed the meaning of the earthly sanctuary by showing its ultimate reality in the heavenly realm.³⁰ His death tore the veil of the sanctuary, removing it as a physical barrier between man and God’s Most Holy Place, and revealing man’s new ability to meet with the Father, through Christ, without any other mediator.

The New Covenant and the heavenly sanctuary were both dedicated by the perfect sacrifice of Christ. Hebrews 9:16–18 states that covenants are ratified by a blood sacrifice. The Old Covenant had to be continually ratified by the blood of calves and goats but the New Covenant and the heavenly sanctuary were ratified by the one-time and perfect offering of the blood of Christ the High Priest (Heb 9:12–14).³¹ Thus, the typological fulfilment of the Old Testament sacrificial system is found in Jesus. It is finished.

Survey of Literature

The aim of this project is to unpack the author of Hebrews’ approach to revitalization. The correlation between the audience of Hebrews and the modern Southern Baptist congregation is not direct but it does exist. The author of Hebrews sought to push his audience beyond a commitment for Old Covenant traditions. This particular desire is not present in the modern congregation but there is a desire to cling to old (and new) church traditions, regardless of whether those traditions are built on proper biblical theological principles. These traditions provide a comfort and cultural security similar to

²⁹ Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 293.

³⁰ Beale identifies archetype, ectype, and antitype in the Garden of Eden, the tabernacle and temple, and heaven respectively. See Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 26.

³¹ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 242.

that which the audience of Hebrews found in their Old Covenant ways. The problem with both the audience of Hebrews and the modern congregation is a lack of a thorough understanding of how the arrival of the New Covenant shapes church life and its commitments. Spiritual immaturity is the root of the issue in both contexts.

The main question that needs to be answered of the literature is, “How does the author of Hebrews bring about spiritual maturity in his congregation?” Since the sermon series for this project focuses on Hebrews 5–10, I will be surveying literature that applies specifically to those passages and how the author of Hebrews used the passages to promote spiritual maturity.

Hebrews 5:11–6:6—“A Better Theology”

In his article, “The Use of Perfection Language in Hebrews 5:14 and 6:1 and the Contextual Interpretation of 5:11-6:3,” Craig Allen Hill argued that the term “spiritual milk” in Hebrews is used as a derogatory statement and does not carry the nurturing tone used by Peter and Paul elsewhere in Scripture.³² This is a view agreed upon by William Lane and Thomas Schreiner in their commentaries on Hebrews.³³ Peter Perry, in his article, “Making Fear Personal” takes the stance that the author of Hebrews was shaming his audience so they would take his warning to heart.³⁴ The literature points to the idea that the audience of Hebrews needs to adopt a better theology.

Hebrews 8:1–6—“A Better Priest”

F. F. Bruce explains the nature of the high priesthood of Christ in his commentary on Hebrews.³⁵ David MacLeod, in his article, “Christ, the Believer’s High

³² Craig Allen Hill, “The Use of Perfection Language in Hebrews 5:14 and 6:1 and the Contextual Interpretation of 5:11-6:3,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 4 (2014): 739.

³³ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*; Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*.

³⁴ Peter S. Perry, “Making Fear Personal: Hebrews 5:11–6:12 and the Argument from Shame,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32, no. 1 (2009): 99-125

³⁵ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*.

Priest,” claims the priesthood of Christ is the central doctrinal theme of the book of Hebrews.³⁶ While identifying one center of theology is a very difficult task, commentators such as Bruce, Ellingworth, and Lane concur that the priesthood of Christ is key to understanding the thrust of the author’s argument.³⁷

Hebrews 8:7–13—“A Better Covenant”

Opinions vary on the proper way to understand the New Covenant in Hebrews 8. Elliott Johnson’s article, “Does Hebrews Have a Covenant Theology?” poses a question about the New Covenant of Christ that can be answered using Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum’s viewpoint in *Kingdom Through Covenant*.³⁸ Kenneth Vandergriff makes an argument for a Jewish apocalyptic view of the New Covenant as opposed to a Middle Platonic lens in his article, “New Covenant as Jewish Apocalypticism in Hebrews 8.”³⁹ His viewpoint will provide further clarity concerning the proper hermeneutical perspective. The question of the relationship between the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Hebrews 8:8-12 will be explored with the help of the article, “The Prophecy of the New Covenant in the Argument of Hebrews” by David Peterson.⁴⁰

³⁶ David J. MacLeod, “Christ, the Believer’s High Priest: An Exposition of Hebrews 7:26-28,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (July-September 2005): 331-43.

³⁷ Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgement*, 51-56. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Lane *Hebrews 1–8*.

³⁸ Elliott Johnson, “Does Hebrews Have a Covenant Theology?” *The Masters Seminary Journal* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 31-54; Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

³⁹ Kenneth A. Vandergriff, “New Covenant as Jewish Apocalypticism in Hebrews 8,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 79 (2017): 97-110

⁴⁰ David Peterson, “The Prophecy of the New Covenant in the Argument of Hebrews,” *Reformed Theological Review* 38 (1979): 74-81.

Hebrews 9:1–15—“A Better Sanctuary”

There is a question among scholars concerning the idea that the earthly sanctuary is a shadow of the heavenly one. Some see a Platonic influence on Scripture.⁴¹ Others disagree.⁴² Gert Steyn’s article, “On Earth as it is in Heaven...” will help to shine light on the differing viewpoints.⁴³ Donald Hagner provides a retrospective look into Exodus and Leviticus, examining the temple components in light of their use in the book of Hebrews.⁴⁴ A grasp of the Old Covenant sanctuary brings about spiritual maturity when its fulfilment is exposed in the heavenly sanctuary of Christ.

Hebrews 9:16–10:4—“A Better Sacrifice”

Philip Hughes, in his article, “The Blood of Jesus and his Heavenly Priesthood in Hebrews,” handles the false Socinian idea that Christ’s sacrifice was made in heaven rather than on earth.⁴⁵ Wilfrid Stott shows that the verb tenses used in describing sacrifice in Hebrews prove that Christ’s work was in fact done on earth.⁴⁶ Stephen Holmes helps to show the link between the sacrifice of Christ and the salvation of Christ in Hebrews.⁴⁷

The article “Hebrews 9 and Hellenistic Concepts of Sacrifice” by James Thompson

⁴¹ H. W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989); S. G. Sowers, *The Hermeneutics of Philo and Hebrews: A Comparison of the Interpretation of the Old Testament in Philo Judaeus and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1965).

⁴² Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*; Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*; R. McLellan Wilson, *Hebrews*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

⁴³ Gert J. Steyn, “‘On Earth as it is in Heaven . . .’ The Heavenly Sanctuary Motif in Hebrews 8:5 and Its Textual Connection with the ‘Shadowy Copy’ of LXX Exodus 25:40,” *HTS Theological Studies* 67, no. 1 (December 2010): 1–6.

⁴⁴ Hagner, *Hebrews*.

⁴⁵ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, “The Blood of Jesus and His Heavenly Priesthood in Hebrews: Part II: The High-Priestly Sacrifice of Christ,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130 (July 1973): 195-212.

⁴⁶ Wilfrid Stott, “The Conception of ‘Offering’ in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *New Testament Studies* 9 (October 1962): 65.

⁴⁷ Stephen R. Holmes, “Death in the Afternoon: Hebrews, Sacrifice, and Soteriology,” in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 229.

expounds on the concept that the Hellenists would have recognized a need for a greater sacrifice than the blood of animals.⁴⁸

Hebrews 10:5–39— “The Better Work of Christ”

Thomas Schreiner, in his commentary on Hebrews, addresses the Hebrews 10:5–18 summation of Christ’s work and its connection to Psalm 40 and Jeremiah 31.⁴⁹ Karen Jobes deals with the fact that Old Testament quotations in Hebrews do not match exactly to the original source in her article, “The Function of Paronomasia in Hebrews 10:5–7.”⁵⁰ Similarly, Ronald van der Bergh, in his article, “A Textual Comparison of Hebrews 10:5b–7 and LXX Psalm 39:7–9” handles changes to the Septuagint text alleged against the author of Hebrews.⁵¹ The above literature provides a solid base for understanding the summation of Christ’s work found in Hebrews 10:5–18. William Lane, in his commentary on Hebrews, provides an outline of the second half of Hebrews 10, splitting it into four sections: a charge for a Christ-centered life (vv. 19–25), a warning for despising the New Covenant (vv. 26–31), a word of pastoral encouragement (vv. 32–35), and an exhortation in the future hope of Christ (vv. 36–39).⁵² Randall Gleason questions the common eschatological assumptions of the passage in his article, “The Eschatology of the Warning in Hebrews 10:26–31.”⁵³ F. F. Bruce and other

⁴⁸ James W. Thompson, “Hebrews 9 and Hellenistic Concepts of Sacrifice,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98, no. 4 (1979): 567-78.

⁴⁹ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*.

⁵⁰ Karen H. Jobes, “The Function of Paronomasia in Hebrews 10:5–7,” *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992): 181-91.

⁵¹ Ronald H. van der Bergh, “A Textual Comparison of Hebrews 10:5b-7 and LXX Psalm 39:7-9,” *Neotestamentica* 42, no. 2 (2008): 353-82.

⁵² Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 281.

⁵³ Randall C. Gleason, “The Eschatology of the Warning in Hebrews 10:26–31,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 53, no. 1 (2002): 97-120.

commentators do not hold to Gleason's view.⁵⁴ A proper understanding of the charge and warning to the audience of Hebrews will provide grounds by which to teach Christ-centered work for the modern believer.

Local Context

I am the pastor of Eastern Hills Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. It was started as a church plant in 1956 by Capitol Heights Baptist, another Montgomery church. The initial purpose of Eastern Hills was to reach the budding Forest Hills community, and it did. As the neighborhood grew, the church grew. Eastern Hills experienced a steady increase in baptisms and attendance. By the mid 2000s the church had an average worship attendance of 800. The year 2006 was the high-water mark before the church began its slow and steady decline. The neighborhood began an economic transition and as church members moved outside the city Eastern Hills was unable to relate to the surrounding residents. Sunday attendance today is around 400, largely comprised of senior adults. The implications are clear to most members, though there is no immediate danger, unless a succinct and biblical path is laid before them, the church will not survive the next twenty years.

While Eastern Hills has a significant portion of spiritually mature believers, it is still largely entrenched in outmoded and atheological tradition. Much like the church in Hebrews, it needs to be reminded of its first love. All its traditions need to be exhumed, exposed, and reported to the church to show that they were given in order to advance the truth of Christ and not just to provide the comfort of empty religious practices. In all these areas, Eastern Hills is not so different than many American churches—it needs revival.

Eastern Hills needs to put aside milk (Heb 5:13–6:1). Long-time believers need to learn what it means to eat spiritual meat and to live in faithfulness to Christ. The Great

⁵⁴ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 257.

Commandment and the Great Commission are highly respected and largely ignored at Eastern Hills, but the ignoring is not intentional. The people of Eastern Hills have what is referred to as “a good heart.” Many of them, however, have become so inoculated by the apparent ease of American Christianity that they have forgotten what it means to yearn for true revival. They did not intend to forget, but they have and they do not realize it.

Eastern Hills needs a model for revitalization with significant spiritual roots. Regrettably, many unhealthy churches believe they have deep roots because they have long-standing tradition, as was the case with the church in Hebrews, as is the case with Eastern Hills. These traditions may produce the stump of a theological tree but will never be the high-reaching glory of the Lord. We cannot have height without depth nor vice versa. God’s glory must extend in both directions.

Eastern Hills is tempted toward tradition, like the church in the book of Hebrews. While the Hebrews’ congregation, however, was drawn toward Old Covenant traditions, the immaturity of Eastern Hills stems from their attraction to more modern traditions (traditions from the last forty years). With those differences in mind, both congregations show similar theological problems. They have failed to properly apply a biblical-theological perspective on Scripture to the practices of the church. This is a situation that needs to be remedied.

One strategy for Eastern Hills could be to go through and destroy old tradition, focusing instead on modern methods that look good to those never interested or no longer interested in Christ. This approach may produce quick results but will likely lead to unhealthy growth rooted in false conversions. Hebrews provides a different model. Instead, the author of Hebrews disciplined his congregation by unpacking the significance of Christ’s work and how it applies to their situation as members of the New Covenant. He did not destroy the religious traditions but showed the church why they were there. He fortified them deep and then said, “let us go on to perfection” (Heb 6:1). This was now a church situated to grow high into the glory of heaven because of its strong roots. The

theology was deep; the knowledge of Christ was pure; the believers were primed to move on to maturity. Eastern Hills needs the same thing: deep theology of God's character, a biblical understanding of the personal work of Christ, and believers committed to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. This is what a biblical theological understanding of the book of Hebrews will do for Eastern Hills.

Igniting growth in the church by bringing them into a robust knowledge of Christ is not a new concept, not even for the twenty-first century. Today, pastors like John Piper, Tim Keller, David Platt, and Mark Dever dig deep into Christ-centered theology in such a way that results in the love of and service to the Lord. However, a tendency remains for many pastors to preach an easier message and allow congregations to remain content with their lack of maturity. It is hard to move past the comfort of old traditions but that is exactly what the author of Hebrews demands.

Eastern Hills has produced truly faithful men and women over the years, so I cannot speak to the distant past, but I can speak to the present. The church needs to be brought into deeper knowledge and deeper action. Heartfelt effort placed toward Independence Day services and tea for graduating seniors (which is fine in and of itself) needs to be overshadowed with a motivation for things like corporate prayer and systematic Bible study. Likewise, in a more modern setting, coffee bars and light shows (which are fine in and of themselves) need to fade into the background for a call to things like cross-generational fellowship and intentional, reproducible, biblical discipleship.

Sermon Series

The book of Hebrews is known for its exegetical difficulty.⁵⁵ To preach it entirely and with proper depth would take more sermons than is practical for this project. However, revitalization can be faithfully expounded from six passages. The Scripture selection below represents significant areas of theological need that the author of Hebrews

⁵⁵ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 12.

recognizes. They focus on the audience's lack of spiritual growth and their desire to hold on to Old Covenant ways. These passages relate well to the modern challenges of church revitalization. The first passage, Hebrews 5:11–6:6, exposes the lackadaisical and/or obstinate heart that hinders spiritual growth in the local church. The following four sermons show Christ's fulfilment of the Old Covenant and the impact his inauguration of the New Covenant has had on religious tradition. He is the better priest (8:1–6), the better covenant (8:7–13), the better sanctuary (9:1–15), and the better sacrifice (9:16–10:4). These traditions are, as the Apostle Paul would say, "our tutor," guiding the faithful toward his truth (Gal 3:24).

Sermon 6 is a summation of the previous four. It reminds believers that Jesus, as the New Covenant Christ, is the *telos* of Old Covenant religious practices. This fact should shape one's understanding of modern church traditions as well. To grow deep in Christ is to separate one's self from a dependence on these traditions. Mere spiritual milk will not satisfy today's believer when their sight is focused on the New Covenant Christ; they will long for solid food. This last sermon is a final call to action. Jesus is the better religion and in him is a better purpose. We go on to live not for satisfying the trappings of religion but to enjoy the freedom of faith in Christ.

Sermon 1: Hebrews 5:11–6:6— "A Better Theology"

The problem of spiritual immaturity is very serious in the book of Hebrews. It is so serious that in 5:11 the author interrupts himself from the deep spiritual truths he was preparing the audience to hear.⁵⁶ He explains that the people were "dull of hearing," not because they were spiritual infants, but because they were *acting* like spiritual infants.⁵⁷ They had no excuse; they were simply immature and were keeping themselves from the riches of the knowledge of Christ. They preferred the comfort of the old

⁵⁶ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 168.

⁵⁷ Hill, "The Use of Perfection Language," 739.

covenant. This problem was so serious that the author tells his audience they are endanger of having turned away from the faith completely (6:4-6). The solution is that the audience would trust the New Covenant in its fulfilment of elementary points of doctrine (6:2) and move past spiritual milk and on to spiritual meat (5:14).

**Sermon 2: Hebrews 8:1–6—
“A Better Priest”**

In chapter 7 the author continued his exposition of the rich theology of the Melchizedekian priesthood that he paused in chapter 5. The close of chapter 5 and all of chapter 6 are side bars in which the author warned the audience of their need to move on to deeper doctrinal truths. Now, in chapter 8, he summarizes the impact of the Melchizedekian priesthood, showing Christ to be the final and ultimate priest who offered the final and ultimate sacrifice (8:3). To the audience, this meant that the Old Covenant priesthood was dead. They needed to see it for what it was, a signpost to the perfect priestly duties of Jesus, and then let it go. The earthly priesthood did its job in pointing to Christ; now its job is finished (8:6).

**Sermon 3: Hebrews 8:7–13—
“A Better Covenant”**

The old priests ministered according to the old covenant. It follows that the new and perfect priest, Jesus, would minister according to the New Covenant. This is a covenant that extended from the law, completed it, and discarded it as obsolete (8:13).⁵⁸ The law is no longer a list of regulations but a relationship written on the hearts of Christ’s followers (8:10). The benefit of this relationship is that it is based on the perfect work of the new priest. All transgressions are forgotten and those under the New Covenant of Christ are made clean (8:12).

⁵⁸ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 254.

**Sermon 4: Hebrews 9:1–15—
“A Better Sanctuary”**

Christ, the perfect priest, now resides in heaven, the Most Holy Place (9:8,12). With the only recognized priest absent from the earth, there is no longer a need for the earthly location of priestly employment. This sanctuary too has been moved into the heavenly realm. The ornaments of the sanctuary served their purpose as a reminder of the paradise of Eden and a foreshadowing of the perfect temple of heaven ((9:1–5, 9–10).⁵⁹ Now, there is a new reminder. The old tabernacle is no longer needed. There is no point in returning to it for absolution. Any place of worship on this earth is merely a building. The meeting place for God under the New Covenant is where the perfect priest resides, in heaven. It is open all hours and our mediator is ever-present (9:15).

**Sermon 5: Hebrews 9:16–10:4—
“A Better Sacrifice”**

The earthly sanctuary had to be purified by the blood of calves and goats. The heavenly sanctuary too was anointed with the blood of the covenant, for wherever a covenant (or a testament) is made, it must be ratified by a living sacrifice (9:16–17).⁶⁰ The perfect sanctuary of heaven needed a perfect covenant and thus, needed a perfect sacrifice. The blood of calves and goats would not do. It had to be the blood of the Son of God himself (9:26). This sacrifice is so perfect that it only had to be offered once for all time (9:28). The Old Covenant sacrifices had to be offered regularly as a reminder each year of the sins before God’s people. The sacrifice of Christ brings with it pure forgiveness and no reminder is needed (10:1–4). Those who live under the New Covenant do not give themselves out of compulsion but out of a heart joined with Christ (8:10).

⁵⁹ Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 66, 313

⁶⁰ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 242

**Sermon 6: Hebrews 10:5–39—
“The Better Work of Christ”**

Verse 5 of chapter 10 begins with a “therefore,” signaling a coming summation of the work of Christ as it had been described from 8:1 through 10:4, the perfect priest, the perfect covenant, the perfect sanctuary, and the perfect sacrifice (10:11-18). Christ did and does his job perfectly and removed the need for temple ornaments. The Old Covenant trappings of religiosity once had an important job but they were taken away by Christ so he could do his. Now only he remains (10:9). It is pointless to return to the spiritual milk of the Old Covenant for it cannot nourish the New Covenant believer properly. It served its time well and now it is done. This is the age of Christ and his church, inaugurated by the gift of the Holy Spirit (10:15–16). The faithful of Christ move on to better things. Verse 19 of chapter 10 signals a change in emphasis. The theology of Hebrews moves from the head to the hands and the audience is called to action. They are urged to treat the blood of the New Covenant, the blood of Christ, as precious (10:29). If they are justified in Christ, they should live by faith rather than by the law (10:38). The implications of the author’s charge are supported by the remaining chapters of the book. Though the law is obsolete, holy living now extends from a heart identified with Christ. Those who are justified do not simply think by faith, they live by it. The author reiterates this fact in the final chapter by providing guidelines by which the faithful in Christ live (13:1–17). This is the path of the mature Christian, understanding religious ornaments as mere signposts to Christ, accepting the New Covenant by faith in the perfect Christ, and living each day according to his law which is written on their hearts.

CHAPTER 2

SERMON 1: A BETTER THEOLOGY (HEB 5:11–6:6)

Introduction

Revitalization is more than just a redefinition of church practice.¹ Though many modern churches have taken the task of revitalization to mean a need for better methodology, the book of Hebrews treats it first as a need for better theology.² The particular kind of weak or faulty theology may have changed, but both the church addressed in Hebrews and today’s American church need revitalization.³

This sermon is designed to show today’s church the seriousness of spiritual immaturity and the need to embrace robust theological convictions which shape our worldview. Commentators are largely in agreement that the “dull hearing” that characterized the audience of Hebrews is a stark warning that they may be in danger of rejecting Christ himself. In addition, the audience was missing out on the great blessings of spiritual maturity in this life. The author of Hebrews did not leave his audience alone with their warning, but followed up with a great encouragement of “better things” in their future. This sermon follows the pattern laid out by the author of Hebrews. The bulk of the discourse is aimed at convicting and warning the hearer of dull hearing or “dull theology,” but it finishes with an encouragement of better things. The hearer is urged to

¹ Brian Croft begins his short book on church revitalization by pointing the reader to the valley full of dry bones in Ezek 37, showing that bringing vitality to a group of people is an act of God brought about by the Word of God. Revitalization takes a renewing of the heart and spirit, something only God can do. Brian Croft, *Biblical Church Revitalization* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 27.

² Croft, *Biblical Church Revitalization*, 51-52.

³ The sermon’s homiletical emphasis is the existing church in America. While the brunt of the teaching is directed toward Southern Baptist churches in particular, it also applies well to the American church as a whole.

grow in the knowledge of Christ and experience a theological revitalization through training in God's word.

Sermon 1

In 1978 a documentary named *Scared Straight* aired on broadcast television. The subject of the Academy Award-winning film was a group of juvenile delinquents placed in a room with actual convicts. As the title implies, the program was designed so the prisoners could scare the juveniles out of a life of crime. The convicts described prison life in explicit detail, hoping the kids would see the trajectory of their current path and decide to avoid a life of crime. The strategy was effective; all but one of the juveniles managed to steer clear of incarceration as they grew into adults.⁴

The author of Hebrews took a “*Scared Straight*” approach to push his readers toward faithfulness and spiritual maturity. One important characteristic of the book is its use of warning passages. At least five of these passages exist in Hebrews.⁵ An overview of the five passages shows their importance in encouraging believers toward perseverance,⁶ but this sermon focuses on just one. Hebrews 5:11–6:12 is foundational for this series on revitalization because it stresses the importance of spiritual progression. This passage warns that Christians must seek a spiritual maturity, and failure to do so could yield dire consequences. Yet, even in the presence of strong admonition language, the purpose of the passage is not to point the reader toward an awful fate but to show confidently that there is a better path to follow. Knowing Christ and seeking to know him better, grasping onto a better theology, ushers a person into true hope and satisfaction.

⁴ Later attempts to duplicate this strategy were less effective. See IMDB, “Scared Straight,” accessed October 25, 2019, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078205/>.

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews: Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 13.

⁶ James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 515.

The Danger of Dull Theology (5:11)

At this point in the book of Hebrews the author had been building a strong theological argument for the supremacy of Christ and the necessity of following him closely. In chapter 1 he showed the glory of Christ as equal to the Father and surpassing all creation, including the angels.⁷ Chapter 2 began with a warning for those who fail to recognize his glory (2:1–4) and proceeded to show how he would share that glory with those who place their faith in him— explaining that Christ would bring “many sons to glory” (2:10). Those sons would share in Christ’s suffering, his salvation, and his perseverance (2:11–18). In chapter 3, those sons of glory form a house greater than that of Moses (3:1–6). This house is rightly understood as the church.⁸

The second half of chapter 3 through much of chapter 4 is a detailed explanation of the rest that is promised in Christ and how that rest the notion of sabbath rest developed across redemptive history.⁹ In those first four chapters of Hebrews the author built theological momentum. He finished chapter 4 and entered chapter 5 by beginning an exposition on the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ and its significance for the reader. At this point the author begins to show the reader the sympathy and mercy Christ has for the weak human condition and that no sacrifice of man could ever atone for sin. Before fully exploring the nature of Christ’s priesthood the author halts his argument in order to admonish his readers about their own spiritual state.¹⁰ The author writes, “about this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 3.

⁸ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 115.

⁹ In a sermon on this passage, John Piper outlined a five-point historical progression of God’s rest, beginning with creation in 4:4, moving to Israel in the wilderness in 4:5-6, then to Joshua’s time in 4:8, and, chronologically, David’s time in 4:7, then concluding with Christ’s rest in 4:9, which is still open to the bleievers. John Piper, “Be Diligent to Enter God’s Rest,” sermon delivered September 1, 1996, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/be-diligent-to-enter-gods-rest>.

¹⁰ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 150.

hearing” (5:11).¹¹ There was a dangerous roadblock in the hearts of his reader. They were primed to receive valuable knowledge about Christ but the author could not continue because his audience had become dull of hearing.¹²

It would be easy for a pastor or church leader to understand the difficulty facing the author of Hebrews. He was prepared to help his audience understand great treasures about their Savior but they were not willing to listen. Modern churches in the United States often display a similar kind of dullness of hearing. A 2016 Barna study about the health of the American church revealed that many self-identified Christians refuse to take necessary steps toward spiritual maturity. Seventy-three percent of Americans claim to be Christians, but only 31 percent of that number actively practice their faith. While three quarters of that 31 percent claim to pray regularly, only 35 percent attend church services regularly; 34 percent read the Bible regularly; 18 percent volunteer at the church; 17 percent attend Sunday School class, and 16 percent attend small groups.¹³ These basic habits so necessary for spiritual maturity are simply missing in the majority of professing American Christians. A more recent report from Ligonier Ministries shows that many evangelicals are confused on the basic tenants of the faith such as the nature of sin and righteousness, the person of Christ, and the holiness of God.¹⁴ The church today needs a renewed passion for spiritual vitality. Like the audience of Hebrews, many modern Christians are guilty of dull hearing.

¹¹ Schreiner explains that the flow of the argument is completely interrupted and is not taken up again until chap. 7. The kingdom of God had been inaugurated by the New Covenant and the author of Hebrews was explaining this great truth of the universe, but he could not continue because his audience had become “dull of hearing.” Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 168.

¹² Donald Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 86.

¹³ Barna Group, “State of the Church 2016,” September 15, 2016, <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016>.

¹⁴ Ligonier Ministries, “The State of Theology,” 2018, accessed November 1, 2019, <https://thestateoftheology.com>.

Some People Are Fooled (5:12–14)

Starting in 5:12, the author explains that his reader should have progressed further toward maturity, “you ought to be teachers,” but instead they still needed to be taught. His tone is rightly critical of his reader. They should be more mature. Yet, the author also explains in 5:14 that the mature have a greater power of discernment.¹⁵ In the spirit of charity, let us briefly explore the possibility that these immature believers, lacking in discernment, had been lulled into a false sense of security. Perhaps they had been fooled into thinking failure to grow as a Christian is somehow permissible.

In verse 12 the author of Hebrews chided his audience for not progressing past spiritual milk. The first audience of Hebrews was struggling with a corrupted view of justification. Their Old Covenant ideas caused them to hold legalistically to false notions of relating to God.¹⁶ Perhaps they naïvely thought they could maintain their past, flawed, understanding of justification while at the same time embracing the New Covenant of Christ.¹⁷

While today’s American church may not wrestle with Old Covenant concepts of justification, there is often a naïve understanding of the necessity to move toward greater maturity in Christ.¹⁸ To both camps, the original reader and today’s church, the author of Hebrews did not allow for a middle-of-the-road faith which permitted half-hearted commitment to Christ’s kingship. He saw only two possible roads, either a person would embrace the New Covenant of Christ wholly or they were denying Him completely.

¹⁵ William Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47a (Dallas: Word, 1991), 136-39.

¹⁶ Richard Bauckham, *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 197.

¹⁷ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 85-86.

¹⁸ Barna Group, “State of the Church 2016”; Ligonier Ministries, “The State of Theology.”

Craig Allen Hill explained the prevalence of this polarity in Hebrews: the Old Covenant had imperfect angels (1:5–7, 13–14; 2:5) while the New has the perfected Christ (2:10); the Old Covenant had the Levitical high priest (5:1–4) while the New has the perfect, Melchizedekian priest —Jesus (5:9); the Old Covenant had an imperfect commandment (7:18–19), the New has the better hope (7:19:22); the Old Covenant appointed those who have weakness as high priests, the New has the perfect Son as the High Priest (7:28); the Old Covenant had imperfect gifts and sacrifices that could not cleanse the conscience (9:9), the New has the perfect blood of Christ which cleanses perfectly (9:14); the Old Covenant had a copy of the true tabernacle (9:24); the New has Christ who entered the more perfect tabernacle (9:11); the Old Covenant was a shadow that could not bring perfection (10:1), the New brings perfection once and for all through Christ (10:14); the Old Covenant was a good beginning to faith (11:40), the New is the perfect end to faith (12:2); the Old Covenant was the untouchable image of Mt. Sinai (12:18–21), the New is Mt. Zion, accessible to all who belong to Christ (12:22–24).¹⁹ In following this established pattern of Hebrews, there is no option to truly follow Christ while also clinging continually to alternative theological convictions or means of relating to God. Christians are not allowed to remain dependent, like a child, on spiritual milk but are to move on to solid food, to mature in Christ.

Perhaps some Christians have simply been fooled into thinking it is alright to remain in a state of spiritual infancy, to remain dependent on spiritual milk. After all, the concept was not always spoken of negatively in Scripture. Peter, for example, told his reader they should long for spiritual milk, desiring the purity of God’s word, that they might grow in their knowledge of salvation (1 Peter 2:2).²⁰ Peter’s single imperative in his statement, that his reader should “long” (ἐπιποθήσατε) for milk, exposes how

¹⁹ Craig Allen Hill, “The Use of Perfection Language in Hebrews 5:14 and 6:1 and The Contextual Interpretation of 5:11–6:3,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 4 (2014): 729-30.

²⁰ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), 86-87.

important the craving is.²¹ If the audience of Hebrews justified their spiritual infancy on the grounds of ideas like that of 1 Peter 2:2 (where spiritual milk was used positively, i.e., desiring “pure” truth from God’s word), the author quickly took away their excuse. The fact is all Christians must grow beyond the need for spiritual milk. This message from Hebrews is necessary for the church today. If the church is going to thrive, Christians must mature in Christ.

Some People Are Disobedient (5:12)

Some Christians have been *fooled* into believing it is permissible to remain dependent on spiritual milk. Sadly, this unintentional lack of discernment is not the case for everyone. Some people are simply disobedient. The author of Hebrews called these people out. They were refusing their spiritual responsibility to mature in Christ, to move on to “solid food,” to commit fully to the New Covenant concept of their relationship to the Lord, and were instead bowing to cultural pressure and returning to Old Covenant ideas. William Lane saw the audience’s actions as a deliberate attempt to “sidestep their responsibility in a world that persecuted them and held them in contempt.”²² Rather than standing firm in the face of opposition, the author of Hebrews found his audience being disobedient to the New Covenant Grace of Christ. Schreiner explains the problem was not that the audience of Hebrews did not *know* the right things but that they were refusing to *do* the right things. The passage concerning spiritual milk is framed by Hebrews 5:11 and Hebrews 6:12 with the word “νωθρός” (meaning “sluggish” or “dull”), showing the issue not to be an intellectual one but a moral one.²³ These people were sluggish in their desire to move forward in Christ. The author was not saying the people should all have been teachers in the technical sense. They were not required to be pastors or elders, but

²¹ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 130.

²² Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 135.

²³ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 169.

they should have all progressed in Christ to the point that they were willing and able to explain the basic truths of the New Covenant to others.²⁴

The concept of dull hearing is found many times through Scripture, and it connotes a spirit of disobedience.²⁵ Just after the commissioning of Isaiah, God told him to preach to the Israelites, proclaiming that their hearts would be made dull, their ears heavy, and their eyes blind because of their disobedience to the Lord (Isa 6:9–10).²⁶ Matthew 13:14–15 references Isaiah 6, developing the theme of dull hearing throughout redemptive history. Jesus, in explaining the purpose of parables, said that the disobedient would remain dull of hearing and not fully grasp the gospel message. The book of Mark shows Jesus rebuking His disciples in their lack of understanding after the feeding of the five thousand. He asked them, rhetorically, if they were unable to see and hear what he was doing (Mark 8:17, 18, 21). Luke recorded a similar rebuke on the road to Emmaus when the disciples did not understand that Christ had to suffer and die according to the Scriptures (Luke 24:25). Luke later referenced Isaiah 6 in Acts summarizing that some would hear and receive the truth of Christ but some people would not because their hearts were dull (Acts 28:27).

A similar kind of dull hearing prevails in today’s church. Whether dull hearing has caused disobedience or vice versa, many Christians are simply refusing to grow in their faith. Long time believers must be coaxed regularly to live the elementary principles of the faith, to attend church gatherings regularly, to read their Bibles, to share Christ with others.²⁷ For example, it is not uncommon in the Southern Baptist Convention for

²⁴ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 170.

²⁵ The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* traces deafness through Scripture and shows how it symbolizes a “spiritual stubbornness.” Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), s.v. “deaf.”

²⁶ G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 39.

²⁷ Barna Group, “State of the Church 2016”; Ligonier Ministries, “The State of Theology.”

men and women 40 years past their conversion to be unable to articulate the gospel message—the very message by which they claim to have been saved.²⁸ The gospel is the most basic teaching of our faith. The gospel is at the core of every vacation Bible school, every church retreat, and (hopefully) every sermon. But the Bible describes this pattern of life as disobedient.

Some People Refuse to Move on from the Past (6:1–3)

The author of Hebrews begins chapter 6 with an appeal, “Let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement” (6:1–2).

Instead of moving toward maturity in Christ, the audience of Hebrews had to be retaught the basics of faith. The stated list of “elementary doctrine” has deeper implications than are apparent at first glance to the modern reader. The author of Hebrews struck at the roots of his audience’s problem — they were trying to hold on to past religious ideas. Hagner explained that the items listed as elementary doctrine all find parallels within Old Covenant Judaism.²⁹ For example, the parallels of baptism (washings) in the Old and New Covenant can be seen in passages like Acts 19:3-5: “And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?”³⁰ They said, “Into John's baptism.” And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” John was baptizing under an Old Covenant idea of

²⁸ LifeWay Research, “Americans Love God and the Bible, Are Fuzzy on the Details,” September 27, 2016, <http://lifewayresearch.com/2016/09/27/americans-love-god-and-the-bible-are-fuzzy-on-the-details/>.

²⁹ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 87.

³⁰ Schreiner explains that “washings” here (βαπτισμῶν) could refer to ritual washings as practiced by the Qumran community or the baptism of John, but the message stands as a contrast between Christian baptism and Jewish cleansing rituals. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 176.

repentance, but the people were urged on to the New Covenant baptism of Christ.³¹ The other elementary doctrines to which the author refers follow the same pattern. Laying on of hands was practiced both under the Old Covenant (Num 27:18,23) and the New (Acts 8:17). The doctrines of resurrection and eternal judgement were not followed by the Sadducees but were part of the Old Covenant understanding of the Pharisees.³² The audience of Hebrews was holding tightly to their old way of life. They needed to put aside their disobedient desire to cling to the past, to be accepted as Old Covenant adherents. They needed to take a stand for the New Covenant of Christ.

The audience of Hebrews sought to syncretize their beliefs with Old Covenant ideas about salvation, likely because doing so would relieve pressure from within their community.³³ A similar situation occurs in churches today. Though there is virtually no pressure to conform to Old Covenant ideas, one reason Christians might not move toward maturity in Christ is because it is much more comfortable to hold on to past immaturity. When faced with the command to move on from past, misguided ways of religion, a modern Christian may realize there are many in the church who hold tightly to those ways. Ill-formed doctrines or practices that took root over the years may have risen to sacred status.³⁴ An individual who decides to move beyond those misinformed doctrines or practices may find a great deal of discomfort in the church. In addition, a person's own desires may keep them from moving on from the past. The cost may just be too great, as was the case with the rich young ruler who would not relinquish the comfortable life his

³¹ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 87.

³² Hagner, *Hebrews*, 88.

³³ Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 135.

³⁴ An example of a practice propagated by immature or uninformed theology would be the modern altar call. Though it can be used in a way that honors Scripture, the altar call is not inherently scriptural and is often raised to sacred status in the modern church. To question its validity or theological backing is to stand in opposition to many long-time churchgoers.

wealth had brought him (Matt 19:16–22). A person may realize spiritual maturity comes with a personal sacrifice they are not willing to make.

Jesus taught clearly against this reluctance to put down past ideas and follow him. Luke 9 records his telling reluctant followers that putting your hand to the plow and moving forward in the work of Christ is not compatible with looking back for the comfort of the old ways (Luke 9:62). He also made it clear that his comfort was not found in this world (Matt 6:19–21; 8:20). Jesus understood a truth about human nature — most of us resist change, the move from old to new.³⁵ Like the audience of Hebrews, today’s church must be willing to endure the pressure of change, the pressure that comes from moving past elementary doctrine (spiritual milk) and on to spiritual maturity (solid food).

Some People Do Not Know Christ at All (6:4–8)

Whether people are being fooled or disobedient, the consequence for failing to mature in Christ are dire. The author of Hebrews showed the seriousness of clinging to spiritual immaturity when he revealed the action as a sign of apostasy (6:4–6). The most startling explanation for the desire to cling to a state of spiritual immaturity is a lack of saving knowledge of Christ. The author explained that it is “impossible” for a person to truly experience the gift of the Holy Spirit and maintain such a level of spiritual immaturity. No theological foundation exists for a person who truly belongs to Christ to hold unyieldingly to what the author calls elementary doctrine.³⁶ Such a determined lack of progress is more than a misunderstanding about Christ; it is disobedience to God on

³⁵ Scott Eidelman, Jennifer Pattershall, and Christian S. Crandall, “Longer Is Better,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46, no. 6 (November 2010), <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103110001599>.

³⁶ Lane feels the audience of Hebrew’s apparent immaturity is not actually being treated by the author as immaturity but as a lack of spiritual integrity. If Lane is right, then the author’s reference to spiritual milk is a shaming mechanism meant to motivate the audience to move past their dull faith. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 135.

the level of rejection.³⁷ The author illustrated his point in 6:7–8: “For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop 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, and its end is to be burned.”

The rain in this illustration represents the “goodness of the word of God” (6:5).³⁸ The land represents those who have been exposed to God’s word. The illustration recalls Jesus’ parable of the sower in which God’s word falls on different types of “soil”. Good soil receives the seed of God’s word well and produces a useful crop. The author of Hebrew’s point is that the seed of God’s word is good and if it is watered well (encouraged toward maturity) there is a reasonable expectation of spiritual growth. However, if that same word of God is planted and nurtured (watered) but there is no growth or there is unhealthy growth (thorns and thistles), the logical conclusion is that the soil is not good. Refusal to mature in Christ is on par with a land that will not produce good fruit.³⁹ A failure to advance in the righteousness of God is evidence of spiritual apostasy. This warning is very serious—true believers must mature in Christ.

The author of Hebrew’s language also brings to mind Genesis 3:18, where God told Adam that the ground would be cursed because of his disobedience, and it would bear “thorns and thistles.” God then proclaimed that Adam would work this hard soil until he returns to it himself as dust (3:19).⁴⁰ This curse of Adam was handed down to all

³⁷ The exact theological implications of the warning passages in Hebrews are still under debate, but the general consensus is that this kind of refusal is not consistent with a genuine, saving faith in Christ. Scot McKnight offers a helpful discussion on the warning passages. Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992): 21-59.

³⁸ Schreiner equates the rain to God’s blessing. I am not arguing against this distinction but including God’s Word as an expression of his blessing. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 190.

³⁹ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 125.

⁴⁰ Gordon Wenham, in his commentary on Genesis, explains the connection between fertile land, which is well-watered and blessed by God, and cursed land that does not receive his blessings. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 82.

mankind.⁴¹ We will all return to dust because we are like that hard soil. On our own merit, every person produces thorns and thistles, and just as the ground needs to be cultivated, so do our souls. Unless someone tills the heart of man, it will remain unfruitful in righteousness. God does the tilling (Rom 9:18). God makes us ready to receive his word and to produce righteous fruit (John 15:16).⁴² A land capable of consistently producing thorns and thistles when provided with proper nourishment is a land absent of good soil. A person capable of consistently clinging to elementary doctrine when solid theological food is provided is a person absent of Christ.

The author of Hebrews explained this phenomenon—a refusal to embrace the maturity of Christ is a possible sign of apostasy. Those who have tasted the goodness of the Lord but have decided they do not want more and more of it, do not belong to God at all in the long run (Heb 6:4). This truth from Hebrews explains much about today’s churches. So many church attenders taste the good things of God and decide they have had enough. Jonathan Leeman noted several symptoms of an immature mindset among churchgoers, including a reluctance to officially join a local congregation, failure to integrate weekly life with other Christians, chronic absence from worship services, failure to consult with wise believers before making major life decisions, choosing a place to live without considering its impact on the ability to serve the church, and refusing to care for other members of the congregation.⁴³ The stark reality is that the kind of symptoms Leeman noted could be evidence of the same immature heart the author of Hebrews warned against. There may not be the same pressure to conform to Old Covenant traditions, but there is the same refusal to accept a growing faith in Christ. This

⁴¹ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 82.

⁴² Kostenberger makes the point that John “cuts to the heart of a given issue” and that the command to bear fruit in John 15:16 is not separate from accepting Jesus as Savior. His statement that “there is no dichotomy between salvation and sanctification,” concerning John 15, aligns with the idea that a heart that has been tilled by God must produce righteous fruit. Andreas Kostenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 524.

⁴³ Johnathan Leeman, *Church Membership* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 23.

lack of desire to progress in faith, could be more than just apathy. These people could lack a saving knowledge of Christ. Many long-time church attenders and members could be heading for eternal separation from the Lord.

Something must be done to bring the local church away from its desire for spiritual milk. The author of Hebrews' strategy was to grow the church stronger by enticing them to move on to solid spiritual food. In other words, they had to be convicted of their unwillingness to grow, they had to put down past ideas of faithfulness, and they had to start seeking after an ever-growing relationship with Christ. To use a modern vernacular, the church needed to be revitalized, and the author's strategy was to entice them on toward a more robust, better theology. This better theology leads to a transformed way of relating to God and a greater strength for obedience.

The Solution Is Better Theology (6:9–12)

The author of Hebrews wrote bluntly in this passage about the peril of clinging to spiritual milk and refusing to mature in Christ. After issuing the grave warning of apostasy, he moved on to offer great encouragement to the congregation, writing, “Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things — things that belong to salvation” (6:9). The author was communicating something to the effect of, “Do I have your attention yet? Good. Spiritual immaturity must be taken seriously. Now that you are listening, let me encourage you to continue to grow in the knowledge and grace of our Lord. I have seen your faith in action, so I know you will move on to maturity.” The author at this point used very positive language to describe his audience, “beloved . . . better things . . . salvation . . . your work and the love you have shown . . . serving the saints as you still do . . . full assurance of hope to the end” (6:9–11).⁴⁴ He then reiterated his earlier warning against spiritual dullness but with an air of hope. He pointed his audience toward those who demonstrated a vibrant faith, “those who

⁴⁴ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 126.

through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12). This verse is a reference to the great heroes of the faith written about later in Hebrews 11.⁴⁵ These were people like Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses, who under great pressure, with faith and patience, moved toward maturity in the Lord.

The author of Hebrews had hope for his audience, great hope, hope that they would experience a vibrant faith on par with the heroes of the Bible. So, how is this kind of maturity in faith obtained? The author had already revealed the answer to that question in 5:14: “solid food is for the mature, for those who have their power of discernment trained by constant practice.”⁴⁶ This verse is in contrast to the preceding critique of those who live on spiritual milk and are unskilled in righteousness (5:13). The solution to the dull hearing of the spiritually immature, those “unskilled in righteousness” is to be trained by constant practice. The author of Hebrews is calling for the building up of the church toward a better theology. This is a call for discipleship.⁴⁷ The idea is confirmed in the writing of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4. He called his reader to build up the body of Christ toward a mature knowledge of the Son of God (Eph 4:12–13). The church needs a robust theology, one that does not bow to the pressures of the world or of false ideas of religion, one that is rooted in the word of God and focused on a greater understanding of the gospel of Christ. Christians must be trained, through “constant practice” so they are no longer “unskilled in the word of righteousness” (Heb 5:13–14).

Conclusion

I pray that the warning and the encouragement of this passage has been received. May all who encounter this truth realize that a desire to remain spiritually

⁴⁵ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 196.

⁴⁶ Some debate exists about whether ἔξιτιν (practice) should be interpreted actively, as a process the Christian undergoes, or passively, as a state of being. Lane points to the use of the word γεγυμνασμένα (trained) as evidence that ἔξιτιν is meant to be understood in the active sense and that practice is what brings Christians into maturity. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 131, 139.

⁴⁷ Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 515.

immature is not acceptable to God, that he has greater aspirations and greater demands for his followers. In addition, may this passage be more than a lesson in what *not* to do but also a spurring on toward a rich relationship with Christ. May all who read this passage recognize the opportunity to be counted among the faithful of the Lord. May you be led toward a greater desire for prayer and Bible study, and may that desire be fostered in a community of local believers, called the church. May we grow together through constant practice, not being unskilled in the word of righteousness but moving ever forward toward maturity in Christ.

CHAPTER 3

SERMON 2: A BETTER PRIEST (HEB 4:14–5:10; 6:13–8:5)

Introduction

Today’s churches go to great lengths to bring people into their worship services.¹ At their worst, these tactics are aimed at simply achieving larger numbers, popularity, or notoriety. Not every church, however, implements numerical growth ministry strategies for selfish gain. Some churches have used these questionable ministry models because they genuinely want to see people grow in their relationship with God.² The Bible, however, presents a very different picture for how God grows his church. The purpose of this sermon is not to judge the validity of church growth tactics but to point the reader to the only sure method of spiritual growth. Scripture presents one pathway by which men grow closer to God, only one conduit that links man to his creator—the gospel of Jesus Christ revealed in the word of God.

The purpose of this sermon is to show the emphasis the author of Hebrews placed on Christ’s role as high priest, the effect that doctrine was meant to have on his audience, and the implications that doctrine should have on today’s church. True spiritual

¹ Destiny Church in Columbia, MD gave away five cars one Sunday to increase attendance. “Church Launches Free Car Giveaway to Increase Attendance,” *Relevant Magazine*, March 6, 2018, <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/church/church-launches-free-car-giveaway-increase-attendance/>. Athens Church, a strategic partner of Andy Stanley’s North Point Community Church, celebrated its tenth anniversary by opening its worship service with secular rock, rap, and R&B songs from each year of its existence. “Athens Church 10 Year Celebration Intro,” YouTube, January 25, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOr9z_bMBFA. Cornerstone Nashville opened a service with a cirque du soleil type show for the congregation. “Cornerstone Nashville—The Greatest Show 06/30/2018,” YouTube, June 30, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84UuOPcTf8M>.

² Perry Noble, when asked why his praise band played the AC/DC song, “Highway to Hell” on an Easter Sunday, replied, “[We’re] engaging [the culture] where they are and bringing them to the word.” Unofficial Elephant Room Archive, “Elephant Room Round 1, Session 2, Mark Driscoll and Perry Noble (2011),” November 28, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lqjuEV1084>.

vitality will not come by clever tactics but by drawing near to God through Christ the better priest.

Sermon 2

My family and I recently took a road trip to the Grand Canyon. After arriving, we quickly realized everything we heard about it was true. The landscape was indescribably vast and awe-inspiring. As I stood on the edge of the canyon, I did what most Christians would do. I pondered the vastness of the God who could create something so awe-inspiring. I also realized I was looking not only at creation but at reconfiguration as well. Great pieces of the earth had been moved, rocks had been split apart, and miles and miles of terrain had been altered. I was looking at the work of the God who not only could form the raw materials of the Grand Canyon but could reconfigure them at will. He told the earth where to be and where not to be.

As I considered God's handiwork before me, I recalled the words of Job as he was questioned by God, "have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?" (Job 38:18); do you know "who has cleft a channel for the torrents of rain . . .to bring rain on a land where no man is, on the desert in which there is no man?" (Job 38:25–26). Who was I to ever call upon a God who could create and reconfigure the Grand Canyon? I was reminded of my need for someone to stand between me and this great God, a mediator, someone to plead my case before him. Whereas Job was not sure where to find this arbiter (Job 9:33), I knew I have one in Christ.

In the last sermon, "A Better Theology," I made the point that the author of Hebrews could not continue to expound on the greatness of Christ. He began to explain Jesus as the great high priest in 4:14 but before he could finish he was interrupted by the realization that he was writing to a theologically dull group of people. I dealt with this interruption and urged listeners on toward a more mature understanding of Christ. This sermon returns to the author of Hebrews thoughts before his interruption, picks up where he left off, and continues his exploration of Jesus as a better priest.

A Profile of the High Priest

Hebrews 4–8 profiles Jesus as our high priest. As if laying out bullet points for his case, the author explains numerous reasons to believe Jesus fulfilled and perfected all qualifications for the Old Testament priesthood.³ He is the transcendent Son of God who understands our weaknesses. He is faithful to provide mercy and grace because that is what he was appointed to do. He prayed for our wellbeing. He learned what it takes to obey in suffering. He displayed his superiority as high priest in that he saves to the uttermost. Jesus truly is everything we hope for in a high priest.

He Is Transcendent (4:14)

The author explains in 4:14 that, though Jesus assumes the title and corresponding responsibilities of the Old Testament priests, he is not a priest of the normal variety.⁴ His relationship to the Father goes beyond the priestly connection established through the tabernacle. That Old Testament tent was a shadowy image of the actual heavens through which Jesus passed.⁵ In addition, the author of Hebrews delineates Jesus as the “Son of God”. This title describes Jesus in human terms while also acknowledging his transcendence. The term “Son” connects Jesus with the earthly nation of Israel, called the “firstborn” of God (Ex 4:22). This concept of sonship was reiterated by Hosea when he wrote, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos 11:1). Matthew later cited this verse from Hosea as a prophetic utterance concerning the birth Jesus Christ (Matt 2:15). Jesus is the perfect son Israel failed to be.

³ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 672-73.

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 152.

⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 24-25.

He was and is able to transcend the earthly constraints of the Old Testament priests because of his unique status as the perfect son of God.⁶

While the term “Son” explains Jesus’ connection with the earthly priesthood, the fact that he is the “Son of God” shows that he is also beyond the earthly priesthood. The author of Hebrews explained Jesus’ transcendent status as God’s Son on several fronts: (1) Christ proclaims a greater message than the prophets of old (1:1–2). (2) He is designated by the Father to hold a transcendent throne (1:5, 8). (3) When Christians fail to grow in their walk with God, Jesus is the offended party (6:6; 10:29). (4) He is eternal (7:3). The author of Hebrews paints a picture of Christ as the high priest who is beyond natural explanation.

Christ’s transcendence makes him the only qualified person able to act as high priest for the church.⁷ No one else from redemptive history could do the job properly. Aaron, Eli, and Zechariah, for example, were noted for their priestly duties, but each fell short of God’s expectations in one way or another. Other men of great faith like Abraham, Moses, and David, though separate from the Levitical priesthood, also failed at some point, and all these people ultimately perished. If these great men of biblical history could not do the job then it is absurd to think the church should look to any figure, ancient or modern, to do it either. Christians must orient their thinking toward Christ as the transcendent high priest who walked the earth as God’s perfect Son just as well as he walked through the heavens.

He Understands Weaknesses but Does Not Share in Them (4:15; 5:2)

Verse 15 begins with the conjunction, γὰρ, which means the following

⁶ The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* explains that “Jesus’ sonship in on one level a successful reply of Israel’s sonship.” Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), s.v. “Son of God.”

⁷ William Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47a (Dallas: Word, 1991), 103-4.

statement functions as the grounds for what has preceded about Jesus' transcendence. The author made clear that, though Jesus had heavenly rights, he is no less able to understand the weakness of the human condition.⁸ Jesus is able to "sympathize without our weaknesses". The author's use of the word sympathize, συμπαθεῖν, connotes more than just a mere commiseration. Jesus actively participated in and helps with our weakness. He walked in the weakness of man so as to be mankind's active help in suffering.⁹

The author uses a negative example in 5:2 of the Old Testament priests. They had sympathy for the weak because they too were weak. They needed to intercede for themselves as much as they did for others. Their example is in contrast to Christ, who, though he felt the weakness of man and was tempted in the ways of man, needed no sacrifice for sin because he was himself "without sin" (4:15). He withstood the temptation perfectly.

Matthew 4 provides a great example of the temptation Jesus faced on earth. Satan used the title "Son of God" (as seen in Heb 4:14) while tempting Jesus three times in the wilderness.¹⁰ R. T. France made the point that these temptations, though carried out by Satan, were allowed by the Holy Spirit of God.¹¹ According to this logic, there is a connection between Jesus' testing in the wilderness and Israel's testing in the wilderness. Jesus, as the perfect son Israel never was, endured God's testing perfectly, while Israel

⁸ Lane explained that v. 15 counters "a possible objection that Jesus' exalted status as high priest in heaven implied his aloofness from the weariness and discouragement of the Church in a hostile world." Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 114.

⁹ Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 108, 114.

¹⁰ Satan's use of the title "Son of God" while tempting Jesus in the wilderness evokes images of Israel's failure to withstand temptation in the wilderness. Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s.v. "Son of God."

¹¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 126-27.

proved unable to remain steadfast. Jesus endured the temptation man could not, qualifying him to be the better high priest.

He Is Faithful to Provide Mercy and Grace (4:16)

The author continued the flow of his argument in verse 16 with another conjunction, οὐδὲ. The idea is that since Christ is the transcendent high priest who understands our weaknesses but does not share them, we should confidently draw near to his throne, knowing we will find mercy and grace.¹²

The throne of Christ appears elsewhere in the book of Hebrews. The author explained in 1:3 that, “after making purification for sins, [Jesus] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” The purpose of Jesus’ sitting is two-fold. First, it shows a completed act. In contrast to the priests of old who had to stand “daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (10:11), Jesus “offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins,” and, “sat down at the right hand of God” (10:12). The author of Hebrews, through his words concerning the throne of grace, reiterated Jesus’ statement on the cross, that “It is finished” (John 19:30).¹³

The second purpose of Jesus’ sitting on his throne is to show his heavenly authority. He sat down “at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (1:3), as “a minister in the holy places” (8:2).¹⁴ Christ not only maintained a heavenly throne, it is a throne at the right hand of the Father, a place signifying unequaled favor and might. In addition, Christ’s placement at the right hand of the Father is symbolic of his status as the second

¹² Hagner explains that the use of temple language (approaching the throne of grace) in v. 16 alludes to the mercy seat and further strengthens Christ as a source of mercy and grace. Donald Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 79.

¹³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 621.

¹⁴ The act of sitting in Scripture connotes royalty and authority. Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “sit.”

person of the Trinity. Biblically, theologically, to be at the right hand of the Father is to be one with the Father.¹⁵

Jesus completed the task of purification for sins, and because he has the authority of God, he has the right to claim that the task is complete. Therefore, the author of Hebrews concluded, we have a great confidence when approaching his throne (10:19), knowing, by the promise of Christ, that we will find there mercy and grace. We have a faithful high priest indeed. This is good news for all.

He Was Appointed to the Task (5:1, 4–6)

The argument of Jesus' high priesthood continues into chapter 5. Verse 1 begins with another conjunction, γὰρ, making it the grounds of what preceded in 4:16. The context places a certain responsibility on Jesus: "For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God" (5:1).¹⁶ He met the previous high-priestly criteria and was appointed to the task. Therefore, he is obligated by virtue of his appointed position to provide mercy and grace to those who approach his throne.¹⁷ This obligation by no means diminishes his authority but solidifies his promise in the duties of high priest.¹⁸ In other words, he is not obligated to meet man's demands for mercy and grace. He is obligated to fulfil his divine appointment. He *is* the high priest, and he *will* offer mercy and grace "on behalf of man in relation to God."

Hebrews 5:1 begins a more explicit comparison between Christ and the Old Testament priests. Like the Old Testament priests, Jesus did not take the honor of priesthood upon himself. He was appointed by the authority of God. Verses 5–6 expound

¹⁵ The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* explains that "the right hand is used particularly as a synecdoche to emphasize God's person and actions." Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s.v. "right hand."

¹⁶ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 79.

¹⁷ Hagner links Jesus' high priestly status in this verse to the Old Testament priestly obligations. Hagner, *Hebrews*, 79.

¹⁸ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 79.

on this idea, “So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’; as he says also in another place, ‘You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.’”

Jesus provided evidence to the fact that he did not exalt himself. John 8:54 records his insistence that he does not assume his own glory but that it is given him by the Father, “Jesus answered, ‘If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me.’”¹⁹ Jesus even gave a fourfold measure by which to test his divine authority: 1) the testimony of John the Baptist (John 5:33), 2) his own miraculous works (John 5:36), 3) the word of the Father (John 5:37), 4) the Scriptures (John 5:39).²⁰

In the context of today’s church, Christ’s appointment as high priest affects how we approach revitalization. The Hebrew congregation needed to understand Christ as the only high priest so they would trust in him alone to atone for sins and head the church with sympathy, mercy, and grace (Heb 4:15–16). God the Father granted full authority to Christ alone so that he alone would direct the church toward vitality (Heb 5:4–6). Part of the task of church revitalization is to understand who holds authority in the church. There is no high priest but Jesus. From him flows all church authority (as he was appointed). All church leaders necessarily fall under the authority of Christ as high priest (Matt 16:17–19).²¹ This basic authority structure helps ensure that the church is not led by mere men of charisma or bravado. A vital church is one that follows only to those appointed according to Christ’s authority.²²

¹⁹ Carson, *The Gospel according to John* 356.

²⁰ Carson, *The Gospel according to John* 260–64.

²¹ Hagner provided a convincing argument that Jesus’ intention in Matt 16:17–19 was that the church community would be built through the appointed apostles, with Peter as their leader. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33b (Dallas: Word, 1995), 471.

²² Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation: Commentary on 1–2 Timothy and Titus* (Nashville: B & H, 2017), 153–55.

He Prayed for His Followers’ Wellbeing (5:1, 7)

The author of Hebrews continues the comparison between Jesus and the Old Testament priests by contrasting their earthly offerings with his offerings. Hebrews 5:1 depicts the Old Testament high priest as offering animal sacrifices for the sins of the people.²³ In turn, 5:7 shows Jesus offering not animal sacrifices but the sacrifice of “prayers and supplications.” The author’s mention of “loud cries and tears” evokes the image of Jesus’ prayers before facing his ultimate sacrifice on the cross.²⁴ John 17 provides insight into Jesus’ offering of prayers and supplications. He cried out in submission to the Father, that their glory (God the Son and God the Father’s) would be known in the crucifixion. Additionally, Jesus cried out in prayer at the same time for his followers. He sought the wellbeing of both the disciples of his day and those to come—future Christ-followers.²⁵ The author of Hebrews explains that Jesus’ prayers were heard “because of his reverence” (5:7), the idea being that his perfect submission to the Father legitimized his intercession for sinful man.²⁶

The fact that Jesus prayed for man’s wellbeing in the way the author of Hebrews describes is remarkable. In the midst of his trials on this earth, while recognizing and praying for his own difficulty and the great glory it would bring to God, Jesus prayed for the church, for “those who will believe in [him]” (John 17:20). The fact that Jesus prayed this way while considering his impending crucifixion is significant. The glory Jesus gave God in his trials is of the same kind that believers today can give God through Jesus as our high priest (John 17:22). The implications of this truth are life-changing. Lives lived in submission to Christ are eternally significant. Jesus prayed that

²³ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 89

²⁴ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 98.

²⁵ Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 568–69.

²⁶ Bruce explained that Christ’s reverence before the Father was an indication that he “recognized the path of the Father’s will, and followed it to the end.” Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 102.

his followers would give God the same kind of glory he gave God and his prayers were heard “because of his reverence” (Heb 5:7). Jesus prayed for our well-being and there is no greater wellbeing than to give God glory through Christ our high priest. Jesus gave perfect glory to God, and in Christ we share in giving that perfect glory.

He Learned What It Takes to Obey in Suffering (5:8–9)

Verses 8 and 9 highlight the humanity of Christ. Just as in 4:15, chapter 5 describes Jesus’ vulnerability, explaining that “he learned obedience through what he suffered.” This phrase does not mean that Jesus was at one time disobedient and had to learn obedience. The author made clear that Jesus lived without sin; therefore, he would never have known disobedience (4:15; 7:26). The key to understanding Jesus’ learned obedience is not the obedience itself but the new situation in which he exercised his obedience. Jesus Christ, in taking on human form, experienced life in the flesh and learned what it means to suffer as a human. His new context did not negate his ability to obey but caused him to learn obedience in a new way. He learned what it meant to obey in the midst of human suffering.²⁷

The idea of Jesus learning obedience through what he suffered is further confirmation that he understands the human condition completely. He knows what it takes to obey through the everyday toils of life as well as in the extreme throws of persecution. This fact adds weight to his role as the perfect high priest. He knows how to lead us toward obedience in the midst of trials and suffering because he experienced trials and suffering and emerged obedient.

Verse 9 explains that Jesus’ perfect obedience in the midst of human suffering helped complete his credentials as high priest. The author used the word *τελειωθείς* (translated “being made perfect”), which connotes the ending or consummation of a

²⁷ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 164.

process.²⁸ Not only did Jesus' earthly suffering qualify him to understand man's suffering, his ultimate suffering on the cross consummated his status as high priest. Thus, Jesus is rightly "the source of eternal salvation to all who [listen obediently] to him" (5:9).²⁹

He Is a Greater Kind of Priest (5:10; 6:13–7:25)

Verse 10 introduces the idea that Jesus not only holds status as a *greater* high priest but as different *kind* of priest. It is in this verse that the author of Hebrews mentioned the name of Melchizedek for the second time (see also 5:6). He was preparing to offer important insight into the nature of Jesus' status as high priest but was interrupted (in verse 11) as he realized that the audience was too immature to grasp such a theologically rich truth. After a blunt chastisement and warning (5:11–6:8), the author offered encouragement to his reader (5:9–12) and proceeded to unveil the truth he had previously withheld.

The author of Hebrews eased his audience into the Melchizedek discussion by way of Abraham. Verses 13–19 recount the means by which God legitimized his promise to Abraham. God "swore by himself" (6:13) as the highest possible name by which he may swear (6:16). In addition to swearing by himself, God also made an oath, solidifying his word upon two "unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie" (6:18). These promises and oaths are a reference to Genesis 22:16–18, a record of God's declaration that Abraham would be the father of a great nation and that nation would be a blessing to all other nations of the earth. God's word to Abraham is verifiable in the nation of Israel. God promised and faithfully fulfilled his promise. The author of Hebrews made use of this historical fact (that God keeps his promises) to illustrate his

²⁸ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 122

²⁹ The word ὑπακούω, translated in the ESV as "obey," connotes the practice of listening or attending with the full intent of obeying.

argument — that Jesus stands as high priest for his people. Logically, if God fulfilled his oath to Abraham then he is trustworthy; therefore, his promise in Jesus Christ is to be trusted. The fact gives us “strong encouragement” and a “steadfast anchor of the soul” (6:18–19). The author of Hebrews continued by briefly elaborating on Jesus’ typological role as it relates to the “inner place behind the curtain” of the tabernacle (6:19), a concept which will be explored further in sermon 4, “A Better Sanctuary”.

The author returned to the Melchizedek discussion in verse 20. This is the concept he refused to unveil in 5:10 due to its depth of theology. After a strong rebuke to his audience (5:11–6:12) he proceeded to expound on the Christology found in the person of Melchizedek. Genesis 14 introduces Melchizedek just after Abram (Abraham) defeated Chedorlaomer. Melchizedek was called a “priest of God Most High” (Gen 14:18), a curious title due to the fact that the Levitical priesthood would not be established for hundreds of years.³⁰ The author of Hebrews exploits Melchizedek’s title to show Christ’s typological fulfilment delineates him as a priest apart from the Levitical order. He is a priest of a different kind.

The author of Hebrews draws out several typological correspondences between Melchizedek and Christ, relying primarily on the language of Psalm 110:4, “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek”³¹ Christ’s typological fulfilment emerges through several of Melchizedek’s unique characteristics (see table 1).

Jesus matched every impressive quality displayed in Melchizedek and then raised it to a level of perfection (thus meeting the typological qualification of historical correspondence and escalation).³² Christ’s fulfilment of the Melchizedekian priesthood is

³⁰ The Levitical priesthood was established through Aaron, as noted in Exod 28:1-3, after the Egyptian exodus, roughly 400 years after Melchizedek’s introduction.

³¹ Matt Emadi, in his article on Ps 110, shows David’s use of Melchizedekian typology and its messianic implications. Matthew Emadi, “You Are a Priest Forever: Psalm 110 and the Melchizedekian Priesthood of Christ,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 23, no 1 (Spring 2019): 57-84.

³² James M. Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 77.

further evidence of his status as *the* high priest. The author of Hebrews used Melchizedek to lead his audience into a greater understanding of Christ that would yield in them a “better hope” (7:19) in their “guarantor” which supersedes the “former priests” and “continues forever” as a priest of a greater kind (7:22–24).

Table 1. Christ’s typological fulfilment of the Melchizedekian priesthood

<i>Melchizedek</i>	<i>Christ</i>
Served by Abraham (7:1-2, 4-10)	“Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day” (John 8:56)
Called king of righteousness (7:2)	Came to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law (Matt 5:17) ³³
Called king of peace (7:2)	“his name shall be called...prince of peace” (Isa 9:6) ³⁴
Depicted as eternal (7:3, 20-25)	“I am the Alpha and the Omega” (Rev 22:13) ³⁵
Outside the Levitical priesthood (7:11-19)	“descended from Judah” (Heb 7:14; Matt 1:3)

He Saves to the Uttermost (7:25–28)

Verse 25 begins with the conjunction, “ὅθεν,” showing that what follows flows from Christ’s qualifications as the superior high priest. Because his priesthood overshadows that of the old covenant Levitical priesthood, Jesus is “able to save to the uttermost”. The adjective translated as “uttermost” is the compound word, “παντελής”, consisting of “πᾶς,” (all) and “τέλος,” (the end). Jesus is able to save all the way to the

³³ Matt 5:17 shows Jesus explaining that he came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets. The passage connotes that Jesus is the righteous completion of the law, surpassing the scribes and the Pharisees. When this passage is taken in conjunction with Jesus’ other statements concerning his relationship to the law and its requirements (Matt 12:8 describes him as lord of the Sabbath), it is permissible to say the gospel writers viewed him as king of righteousness.

³⁴ The gospel of Luke alludes to Isa 9:6 as prophecy of the Christ child born in the city of David (Luke 2:11).

³⁵ Hamilton makes an interesting case for the eternal status of Christ from Dan 7:25. He notes the linguistic similarities between “one like a son of man” and the “Ancient of Days” and pressed the point that Daniel was foreshadowing Christ as coeternal with God the Father. James M. Hamilton, Jr., *With the Clouds of Heaven*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 151).

end.³⁶ This statement in verse 25 augments the doctrine of perseverance by showing that Jesus “always lives to make intercession,” for “those who draw near to God.” Jesus, as the eternal new covenant priest, will make intercession for his new covenant people as long as he lives, which means eternal security for those who draw near because Jesus lives eternally.

The fact that Jesus saves to the uttermost is a great encouragement for today’s church. In the midst of a passing world, the church is guaranteed an everlasting faith in Christ as the eternal high priest. He saves all the way to the end, and he is the kind of priest mankind has always needed. Verses 27–28 explain that the high priests of the old covenant performed an important task for the time, but in their weakness they could only ever maintain the status quo without making any real advance against sin. Because they had to sacrifice for their own sins first and then for the sins of the people they were only sufficient as placeholders until a better priest could offer a more lasting sacrifice.³⁷ Verse 26 shows how Jesus met that qualification, being “holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.” Not only was Jesus exempt from atoning for his own sins, his perfect status as a high priest meant that his personal sacrifice (discussed further in sermon five, “A Better Sacrifice”) was sufficient to save “once for all” (7:27).³⁸ This is the kind of priest the audience of Hebrews needed then and the kind we need today, the kind who saves to the uttermost.

He Is the Substance of Everything Hoped For (8:1–5)

Chapter 8 begins with the word “κεφάλαιον,” indicating a summation of the previous discussion. Jesus, the transcendent high priest, sits enthroned in heaven, ministering eternally on behalf of those who hope in him (8:1–2). His ministry was

³⁶ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 189.

³⁷ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 237-39.

³⁸ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 238.

modeled, but not completed, by earthly, Levitical high priests who minister according to the old covenant law (8:3-4). This old covenant law and priesthood is but a shadow of what would come in Christ. The author supported this last point by way of Moses, who was given instructions to build the tabernacle according to a certain design (discussed further in sermon 4, “A Better Sanctuary”) (8:5). The better tabernacle to come would require a greater priest.³⁹

Just as a shadow evidences the existence of a solid object, the old covenant priesthood (as it functioned within the law) evidenced the coming of a better priest (8:5). The Apostle Paul explained that the religious observances of the old covenant were indeed a shadow that pointed to the substance of Christ (Col 2:16–17).⁴⁰ The author of Hebrews would later apply the same concept to faith itself, stating that faith points toward that which is not seen (Heb 11:1). He would go on to explain that Old Testament believers operated according to this kind of faith, a faith that led them to offer sacrifices of many different kinds, a shadow that pointed them toward the Christ that had not yet come. Though believers today do not operate under the same kind of old covenant shadow, we are commanded to hold the same kind of faith (Heb 11:6). The faith of today’s Christian must be supported by and point to Christ as the substance of our faith.⁴¹

The Proper Response to the High Priest—Draw Near

There is an action step found in Hebrews sprinkled throughout the doctrine of Christ as the better priest—the reader is urged over and over to draw near. We, the church, are to confidently “draw near to the throne of grace” (4:16). We are able to draw near through our better hope in our better priest (7:19) who “lives to make intercession”

³⁹ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 117-18.

⁴⁰ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 117-18.

⁴¹ Brian Vickers makes the point that Christians must be careful to avoid promoting an ambiguous “faith.” Faith must be explicitly pointed toward Christ, or it is illegitimate. Brian Vickers, *Justification by Grace through Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013), 77.

on our behalf (7:25). The author of Hebrews went on to explain (by way of negative example) that we who draw near are made perfect in the eyes of God (10:1), having been “sprinkled clean,” and, “washed with pure water” (10:22).⁴² Lastly, the author explained that we who draw near have access to the same kinds of rewards promised to the forefathers of our faith (11:6). Only in Christ does today’s sinful man have the privilege of drawing near to the throne of grace. The old covenant prevented all but the high priest from drawing near to God (Lev 16:1–5). However, the message of Christ, as a better priest, is that all who humble themselves might draw near with confidence and receive the grace and mercy of the Lord (Heb 4:16; Luke 14:11; Jas 4:8). A church that draws near to Christ as the better priest is a church ripe for revitalization.

⁴² Bruce provides a good explanation of the relationship between the sprinkling of the heart, the washing of the body, and the pure conscience of the believer. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 250-52.

CHAPTER 4

SERMON 3: A BETTER COVENANT (HEB 8:6-13)

Introduction

The New Covenant culminates and fulfills God's promises found throughout redemptive history as far back as the book of Genesis. Since the fall of Adam, the curse of sin and the promise of redemption have been expressed through God's covenants. This sermon seeks to explore the history of these covenants leading up to the New Covenant. In Hebrews 8:6–13, the author has two primary goals. First, the author explains how Scripture's covenants ultimately find their culmination in the New Covenant and how the progress of the covenants should bolster the faith of the Hebrew congregation. Second, the author seeks to help the congregation understand who belongs to the New Covenant. In line with the author of Hebrews' goals, this sermon is designed to help the congregation recognize their standing in the New Covenant so that they might gain confidence and assurance in him as Lord and so that they might understand their identity as regenerate members of God's eschatological covenant community.

Sermon 3

Imagine standing atop a skyscraper. At this dizzying height you look down and notice the ground below has started to shake. The shaking continues and intensifies, growing to the point that it seems the entire world is rattling off its hinges. You notice buildings below crumbling. Your skyscraper is holding strong, but for how long? How do you know you can trust your building to hold up to the turmoil around you?

Every person has a system of beliefs, a worldview, upon which they stand. As long as things are going well in life, we have no reason to question our worldview. But

what happens when tragedy or turmoil shakes our foundations? How do you know you can trust that your worldview will not crumble beneath you?

This sermon explores the God’s promises in the New Covenant. I want to show you that his promises can be trusted and will stand strong under great tumult. I want to show you the foundation of Christ’s covenant and the fact that it reaches back to the beginning of time. It is firm and unmovable and it is written on the hearts of all who trust Christ as Lord.

The Superiority of Christ’s Covenant

The previous sermon ended with Hebrews 8:1–5 summarizing Christ’s qualifications as high priest and his superiority over the Old Covenant Levitical priesthood. Hebrews 8:6 begins a discussion of Christ’s “more excellent” ministry as the mediator of a better covenant.¹ Understanding the better covenant and the better promises on which it is enacted means first understanding the previous covenant and its promises. Since creation, God has taken it upon himself to covenant with mankind, and his covenants follow a particular formula. The formula is found in full in Exodus 6:7, “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”² The formula breaks down into two parts: 1) I will be your God; 2) You will be my people. The two parts of the formula may appear together or separately.³

The Old Testament records God making five different covenants with man: the Creation Covenant,⁴ the Noahic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 167-68.

² Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 79.

³ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 271.

⁴ I argue in this sermon that, though Scripture never explicitly calls God’s interactions with Adam a covenant, all the elements of a covenant are part of the biblical narrative in Gen 1–2.

Covenant, and the Davidic Covenant. While Hebrews 8:9 only explores how the New Covenant contrasts with the Mosaic covenant, we must still consider how all of the biblical covenants fit together cohesively within the Biblical storyline.⁵ Ultimately, the covenants work together as one unit.⁶ The Creation Covenant supports the Noahic, supports the Abrahamic, and so on. As Emadi and Sequeira note, “With each new covenant, God unfolds his eternal plan, filling out the details and developing earlier promises while bringing Israel’s eschatological hopes into sharper focus.”⁷

Therefore, even though the author of Hebrews was simply contrasting the Old Covenant with the New, in order to fully understand the significance of the Old Covenant we need also to understand how it relates to and advances previous covenants in Scripture.

Creation Covenant

The Creation Covenant (also known as the Adamic Covenant or “covenant of works”) surfaces in Genesis 1–3. Controversy exists over whether God’s relationship with Adam should be classified as a covenant.⁸ Gentry and Wellum offer a five-fold argument as to why we should see a covenant in Genesis 1–3: (1) Though the word “covenant” is not used in Genesis 1–3, God’s words to Noah in Genesis 6:18, that he would “establish [his] covenant,” connote the existence of a previous covenant.⁹ (2) The

⁵ New Testament authors sometimes contrasted the New Covenant with different Old Testament covenants. For example, Luke wrote about God’s “holy covenant” in referring to the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants (Luke 1:69-73). Paul, like the author of Hebrews, mentioned “the old covenant” while referencing the Mosaic Covenant (2 Cor 3:13-15).

⁶ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 619.

⁷ Aubrey Sequeira and Samuel C. Emadi, “Biblical-Theological Exegesis and the Nature of Typology,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 21, no. 1 (2017): 24.

⁸ Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 72.

⁹ Gentry and Wellum provide a more in-depth explanation concerning the absence of the word “covenant” in the Creation Covenant. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 177-81.

doctrine of the *imago dei* implies the covenant formula — “I will be your God. You will be my people.” (3) A clear scriptural, theological relationship exists between Adam and Christ. It is logical to understand Adam as the head of the Creation Covenant in preparation to receive Christ as the head of the New Covenant. (4) In addition to the concept of covenant headship, there are other typological patterns that extend from the Creation Covenant. These patterns include rest, sanctuary, and marriage, each inaugurated in the Creation Covenant and fully realized in the New Covenant. (5) The covenantal theme of sin and redemption also begins in the Creation Covenant and carries through each subsequent covenant until finding its *telos* in Christ’s New Covenant.¹⁰ The theme of sin and redemption will drive this sermon’s discussion of the covenants since it best illustrates the author of Hebrews’ point concerning the inferior nature of the Old Covenant as opposed to the new (Heb 8:9–10).¹¹

The Creation Covenant was broken early on, when God’s covenant people (Adam and Eve) sinned against him by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:6).¹² When this covenant was broken, all of creation was affected.¹³ To this day, all of creation suffers under God’s curse. Jails, hospitals, and funeral homes exist because God’s good creation was marred by sin. This brokenness has been in motion since the fall— Adam and Eve were cast from paradise (Gen 3:24), intimacy with God was damaged (Gen 3:9), God’s good gift of work became toilsome (Gen 3:17–18), family

¹⁰ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 612–28.

¹¹ William Lane notes, “The new covenant thus brings to its consummation the relationship between God and his people, which is at the heart of all covenant disclosure from Abraham onward.” William Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47a (Dallas: Word, 1991), 209.

¹² Arguing for the Creation Covenant, as this sermon does, leads to the logical conclusion that Adam and Eve were God’s covenant people. Gentry and Wellum explore the covenant relationship between man and God, starting with Adam, as it is linked ontologically through man’s status as image bearer. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 184–200.

¹³ Rom 8:20–22 says, “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.”

relationships became strained (Gen 3:16), and death became inevitable (Gen 3:19). Every created thing is now defective.

Yet, just as sin emerged into the world, so also did God's redemption. Genesis 3:15, known as the protoevangelium, is the good news of God's saving grace—the first gospel.¹⁴ This verse explains that the seed of the woman will bruise the head of the serpent while the serpent will bruise his heel. This pattern of enmity between the two seeds develops typologically across the canon but ultimately culminates in Christ's suffering on the cross for the sins of mankind. On the cross, Jesus dealt a crushing blow to Satan, the “ancient serpent” (Rev 20:2).¹⁵ This message of hope from Genesis both informs a vital church of the problems it faces and strengthens its resolve to proclaim the message of Christ.

Noahic Covenant

The sin of Adam continued through his lineage and escalated to a breaking point in the time of Noah. God determined to destroy “all flesh” on the earth by a great flood. He promised to spare Noah and his family (Gen 6:13–22). After the flood, God established a new covenant with Noah, the first covenant specifically named in the Bible:

Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth (Gen 9:9–11).

The Noahic Covenant was a reinstatement of God's first covenant with creation. The time after the flood represents a fresh start for God's creation agenda. Noah, a new Adam, receives the same commission God gave to Adam to “be fruitful and multiply and

¹⁴ Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 68.

¹⁵ James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 57.

fill the earth” (Gen 1:28; 9:1).¹⁶ God implied the covenant formula (“I will be your God. You will be my people.”) in his promise to Noah, his offspring, and every living creature; they will be his and he will be theirs.

As with the previous covenant, it would not be long before sin reappeared. Noah and his sons demonstrated rebellious behavior in the sight of God (Gen 9:20–22), and Genesis 11 shows that the wickedness of the people of the earth had resurfaced.¹⁷ The Tower of Babel incident recounts mankind’s desire to become great over and above God. In their prideful building campaign, the people constructed a tower and city, showing God their desire to become great and their refusal to go out and fill the earth as he commanded (Gen 9:1). As a result of their sinful rebellion, God confused their language and scattered them across the face of the earth (Gen 11:4, 8). The Noahic Covenant was broken.

This broken covenant, however, would also be redeemed one day. Acts 2 shows a reversal of God’s curse on the nations. On the day of Pentecost, when the church was formed by the power of the Holy Spirit, the nations were regathered under the New Covenant of Christ: “Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language” (Acts 2:5–6). The formation of Christ’s New Covenant church brought the redemption necessitated by the broken Noahic Covenant.

Abrahamic Covenant

The Abrahamic Covenant develops many of the same theological themes found in the Noahic covenant. God, through Noah and the incident at the Tower of Babel,

¹⁶ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 629.

¹⁷ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 629.

instituted the nations.¹⁸ Through Abraham, God provided the means by which the nations would be blessed. While the Abrahamic covenant is first established in Genesis 15, Genesis 17:7–8 is perhaps the clearest depiction of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant: “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.” The first part of the covenant formula is easy to spot in this passage, “to be God to you and to your offspring after you . . . I will be their God.” The second part of the formula is implied, “you will be my people.”¹⁹ Abraham’s descendants would become the nation of Israel, through whom God would reveal himself to all the nations of the earth (Gen 12:3).²⁰ The Abrahamic Covenant is the means by which God began to reverse the curse of both the Noahic Covenant and the Creation Covenant.²¹

Unfortunately, Abraham, like Adam and Noah, threatened to derail the covenant. Immediately after the covenant ceremony in Genesis 15:8–21, Abraham (Abram), and his wife Sarah (Sarai), faced with her barrenness, plotted an alternative means to produce offspring for Abraham.²² Sarah suggested Abraham impregnate her servant, Hagar, and Abraham complied (Gen 16:1–2).

¹⁸ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 631.

¹⁹ Gordon John Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 21.

²⁰ Gentry and Wellum explain that, instead of destroying the nations, as God did in Noah’s day, he called Abraham out of the nations in order to later bless the nations through Abraham. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* 631.

²¹ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 262.

²² The reader can reasonably deduce that the Abrahamic Covenant was meant to be fulfilled through Abraham’s wife, Sarah, and not by some other means. Gen 12:17 shows God afflicting Pharaoh so that he would not take Sarah away from Abraham as his wife. Gen 17:16 shows God blessing Sarah and promising that she, like Abraham, would be responsible for the birth of nations.

A pattern of disobedience persists through the covenants so far, and today's church needs to take note. God provided great blessings and promises to his people through his covenants. He would be their God and the only stipulation is that they would live as his people, but in each instance, the covenant heads refused to allow God to act for them to fulfill his promises. Adam, Noah, and Abraham, were happy to be the recipients of God's blessing but failed to trust God's timing to fulfill his promises. They took matters into their own hands. God made Adam in his image, but Adam still wanted to be yet more "like God." Abraham was promised a son, but instead of trusting God's promise sought progeny by his own ingenuity.²³ Their actions are a warning to the church. We live under the excellence of the New Covenant (Heb 8:6), a covenant with even greater promises than those given to Abraham. As such we should trust God's promises and patiently wait for the Lord to work for his church. Unlike Adam, Noah, or Abraham, our covenant head will never fail and is wholly deserving of our trust. We may be tempted to think that our church will grow by our own creativity or ingenuity, but what the Lord requires of us is that we trust his work and his promises given to us through Christ in the New Covenant.

Thankfully, God's love is far superior to our obedience. His desire to be our God is greater than our desire to be his people. He saw fault with the old covenants in that the people would not and could not continue in them (Heb 8:8–9). As the pattern of covenant breaking continued, God provided a radical solution in the covenant ceremony with Abraham. Abraham brought the animal sacrifices necessary for the ceremony and prepared them by cutting them in half, as was the custom. The traditional covenant ceremony dictated that the covenanting parties would walk between the pieces of the sacrificed animals, symbolically stating that the one who broke the covenant would be put to death like the animals. When it was time to walk between the pieces, Abraham fell asleep. He then had a vision of God passing through the pieces alone in the form of a

²³ Abraham lied about Sarah on two different occasions (Gen 12:13; 20:2), placing her in harm's way and threatening the covenant. He also conspired with Sarah to find an alternative means for God's blessing through her servant, Hagar (Gen 16:2).

“smoking fire pot and a flaming torch.” God alone walked through the slain animals. Abraham never passed through. God instituted the covenant by himself (Gen 15:8–21). God’s actions imply that whoever broke the covenant, God himself would pay the price of disobedience and bear upon himself the covenant curses.²⁴ The ceremony is a great picture of hope, that God would make a way for a people who could not keep his covenant to avoid bearing the curse of a broken covenant.

Mosaic Covenant

Just as the Abrahamic covenant develops theological themes found in the Noahic covenant, the Mosaic Covenant continues the development of the Abrahamic Covenant.²⁵ The Mosaic covenant is directed not toward one particular person (like Abraham) but the entire nation of Israel (Ex 19:5). The Mosaic Covenant is the covenant the author of Hebrews called the “first covenant”, or, by implication, the “old covenant.”²⁶ The Mosaic Covenant, given to Moses at Mt. Sinai, encapsulates the Law, pictures God’s righteousness, and ultimately exposes the fact that mankind does not uphold God’s holy standard.²⁷

Hebrews 8:9 explains that Israel, as with the previous recipients of God’s covenants, “did not continue in [his] covenant.” Moses had not even come down from Mt. Sinai before the people of Israel had already broken the covenant and transgressed God’s law by following after other gods (Ex 32:1). It is impressive how quickly and how definitively the Israelites broke the covenant. Their actions fall right in line with each of

²⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, Preaching the Word Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 234.

²⁵ The Mosaic Covenant is also known as the Israelite Covenant, the covenant at Sinai, or the old covenant.

²⁶ The author of Hebrews compared the Mosaic Covenant with the “New Covenant,” so, by contrast, he was referring to it as the “Old Covenant” (Heb 8:8-9, 13).

²⁷ A. T. Selvaggio, *From Bondage to Liberty: The Gospel according to Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2014), 129-30.

the previous covenant transgressions. Adam was told not to eat the fruit in Genesis 2:17. One chapter later, he is seen eating the fruit (Gen 3:6). God covenanted with Noah in Genesis 9:9–11, recommissioning him in the Adamic task. Several verses later, he and his sons are disobedient (Gen 9:20–22). The covenant ceremony with Abraham took place in Genesis 15:8–21. Abraham is immediately found transgressing the covenant (Gen 16:2). It is almost shocking how quickly man is depicted as running away from his covenant with God.

At this point, we may be tempted to look back on such unfaithfulness with a condemning eye, but Christians today share in the same shortcomings of these Old Testament covenant-breakers. Many church attenders will not make it out of the parking lot from Sunday morning’s service without transgressing against God—we indulge envy, lose our temper in an ungodly way, bear false witness, worry unnecessarily, and engage in other behavior that transgresses God’s commands. The Mosaic Covenant, of all the covenants covered so far, most clearly expresses man’s gross inability to uphold God’s holy standard.²⁸ This covenant does a great job of exposing our need for some better agreement with our creator, some kind of better covenant.

Davidic Covenant

The Davidic Covenant takes the expanded nature of the Mosaic Covenant (extending from one person, Abraham, and given to the nation of Israel), and narrows it again to one person, David—Israel’s king and representative head.²⁹ This covenant is stated in 2 Samuel 7:8–16. In this passage God tells David, “when your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam 7:12–13). David, at

²⁸ The apostle Paul stated clearly, “The law came in to increase the trespass,” signifying the old covenant’s ability to expose man’s sinfulness (Rom 5:20).

²⁹ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 640.

the end of his life, reiterated this promise from God using covenant language (2 Sam 23:5). David's son, Solomon, later referenced the Davidic Covenant, using part of the covenant formula, "you will be my people," in dedication to God in his own governance as successor to David (2 Kgs 3:6–9; 8:23–24).³⁰

As promising as the Davidic Covenant was, it did not represent the ultimate fulfilment of God's promises. David could not have been the perfect covenant keeper for two reasons: 1) He failed to maintain perfect loyalty to God. Scripture records two sinful acts David committed against God—adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah (2 Sam 11), and the unauthorized calling for a census (2 Sam 24:1–17). 2) As all men do, David died. He could not be the eternal king because he was defeated by death. Thankfully, David was never meant to be the last covenant keeper. God's covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7:12–13 is worded in such a way that compels the reader to think beyond David, to look forward to one of the bloodline of David. This person would be the perfect covenant keeper who would not be corrupted by death.³¹

From the time of Adam, the curse of a broken covenant haunts us all. God promised we would each one day die and return to dust (Gen 3:19). We must all consider this reality. In 100 years very few of us, if any, will still be alive. We are perishable creatures in a perishable world. No one on the planet can keep this curse of death from coming to fruition. No doctor, lawyer, educator, politician, spouse, or spiritual guru can reroute mankind's ultimate destination. Each has failed to live completely absent of rebellion to the Lord, failed to keep God's perfect covenant, and is thus under the curse (Rom 3:23; Matt 5:20). The covenants of the Old Testament, in showing both the good

³⁰ Heath Thomas and J. D. Greear, *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Samuel*, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville: B & H, 2017), 194.

³¹ The apostle Paul, in his speech at Antioch, used David's death as evidence that he could not have been the perfect covenant keeper. The Israelites needed to look to one who "did not see corruption" (Acts 13:36-37).

promises of God and the rebellious heart of man, served their purpose well — pointing us all toward our desperate need for a better covenant (Heb 8:6).³²

New Covenant of Christ

The author of Hebrews, pointing toward mankind’s need for a better covenant, quotes Jeremiah 31:31–34 (Heb 8:8–12). Writing half a millennia before the coming of Christ, the prophet Jeremiah explained a time when membership in God’s covenant community would be synonymous to knowing God himself.³³ The only way this kind of assurance would ever be possible would be through a ministry more excellent than that of the broken Old Covenant. This ministry is the ministry of Jesus Christ (Heb 8:6).

When Jesus was born, he entered redemptive history at a time brimming with expectation for how God might fulfill his old covenant promises. When he stepped into human history, he stepped in with perfect correlation to all that had gone before him.³⁴ Jesus is the perfect covenant keeper anticipated from the first covenant.³⁵ He perfectly culminates Israel’s story because the story is ultimately his.³⁶ The New Covenant of Christ is the climactic fulfilment of each of the other covenants. He is the perfect humanity Adam could not be at creation. He is the true and better Noah who saves his people from the flood of God’s wrath.³⁷ He is the true seed of Abraham that brings

³² Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 208.

³³ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 209-10.

³⁴ Passages like Luke 24:44 show Jesus’ keen awareness of the previous covenants as they were written in the Law and the Prophets and the fact that he was meant to fulfill those covenants.

³⁵ Jesus is the seed of the woman foretold in Gen 3:15 to crush the head of the serpent (Rom 16:20). James Hamilton, “The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman: Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no.2 (Summer 2006): 42.

³⁶ Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 160.

³⁷ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 629.

blessing to the nations. He is the faithful nation Israel could not be.³⁸ He is the eternal king David could not be.

Jesus is the only one who kept God's covenant. In fact, the design of the New Covenant made it possible for Jesus to atone for the previously broken covenants. The condition of each covenant was that all parties involved had to faithfully uphold their end of the covenant. If one side was not faithful, the covenant was broken and the guilty party received the consequences. The Abrahamic Covenant set the precedent that God himself would pay the consequence no matter who broke the covenant. God passed through the broken animal sacrifices alone while Abraham slept, effectively portraying the punishment God would bear when Abraham (and all covenant breakers) inevitably broke the covenant. That consequence was paid by God himself in Jesus Christ as he hung, broken, on the cross.³⁹ For this reason, Jesus explained that the New Covenant would be made in his blood (Luke 22:20). It is for this reason also that Christ alone is sufficient for salvation (John 14:6). There are many well-meaning people who claim to be close to God apart from the promises of Christ, but such is impossible because no one apart from Christ fulfilled the conditions of God's covenants. What an amazing truth for the church. The affirmation and reaffirmation contained within the New Covenant of Christ is invaluable to a congregation as it moves forward in vitality.

Christ's Covenant for the Church

It is important for a preacher to make sure his congregation appreciates the rich background of the New Covenant of Christ. Though the author of Hebrews said the people of the New Covenant would not need to "teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord'" (Heb 8:11), he also urged believers toward a

³⁸ The author of Hebrews paints a picture of Jesus occupying the role of the perfect son the nation of Israel failed to be. See chap. 3, "A Better Priest."

³⁹ Hughes, *Genesis*, 234.

robust faith that was full of the profound truth of Christ (Heb 6:1).⁴⁰ Part of that robust faith is understanding the history behind the covenants and why the New Covenant is so significant in redemptive history (which is why this sermon spent time explaining that history). Another part of that robust faith is understanding who belongs to the New Covenant. Not everyone listening to a sermon in a Sunday service is counted among God's people. John 1:12 makes clear that, while all humans are God's creation, not all are God's children.⁴¹ It is for this reason that the author of Hebrews defined the true children of God as the people of the New Covenant (Heb 8:10).⁴²

Hebrews 8:8–12 is a quote of Jeremiah 31:31–34. In its original context this passage in Jeremiah follows the prophet's statement that, "Rachel is weeping for her children" (Jer 31:15), a statement Matthew the evangelist used to describe the slaughter of the innocents just after Jesus' birth (Matt 2:18). Jeremiah 31 is a passage that was written to comfort the people of Israel in a time of great distress. The nation was being defeated and carried away captive to foreign lands. Rachel, the mother of three of the tribes of Israel, was metaphorically weeping for her children. The prophet promised that God would one day bring them back and again make them his people, but there would be something different about their relationship this time. There would be a new covenant and the people of this covenant would not have to be told who their God is (Jer 31:31–34). The author of Hebrews saw the divine truth of this promise from Jeremiah fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Thus, whereas the Old Covenant pertained to people of a particular earthly nation (the nation of Israel), it also contained members who were not of God's heavenly nation. In other words, there were members of the Old Covenant who did not know God

⁴⁰ See chap. 2, "A Better Theology."

⁴¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 126.

⁴² Heb 8:10 explicitly states the covenant formula: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

in a spiritual sense and still needed to be taught to “know the Lord” (Jer 31:34; Heb 8:11). Thus, a person could be an Israelite, go through all the religious motions, but still be separate from God’s saving grace. This reality, however, is not the case with the New Covenant church. The author of Hebrews clearly states that the church is only made of people who have God’s “laws [in] their minds and [written] on their hearts” (Heb 8:10). People of the New Covenant are not identified by nationality, skin color, or political affiliation. People of the church are identified by the fact that they have accepted the cup of the New Covenant which is Christ’s blood spilled for them. The true people of the church have accepted the fact that Christ’s sacrifice is the only thing that satisfies the requirements of the Old Testament covenants. These people know the Lord. These people are the true children of God. Today’s church cannot regain or maintain vitality if it is built on people who still need to be told, “know the Lord.” We are to be a community of New Covenant people with God’s laws written on our hearts. This doctrine of the regenerate New Covenant church is foundational to Baptist theology. For instance, Article VI of the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message defines the church as a group of “baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel.”⁴³ Regenerate church membership is one of the distinctives of the Baptist faith.⁴⁴ As we seek vitality, church leaders must diligently and lovingly affirm evidence of salvation in church members. Every church member must, by definition, clearly know the Lord.

Conclusion

Because the New Covenant belongs to the more excellent ministry of Christ and is enacted on better promises, it is not like the Old Covenant; it is a better covenant. Because it is a better covenant it “makes the first one obsolete” (Heb 8:13). This fact should give the people of today’s church great confidence. We stand on a solid

⁴³ Southern Baptist Convention, “The Baptist Faith and Message,” accessed January 24, 2020, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>.

⁴⁴ Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), 3.

foundation built through the ages. We belong to the covenant all others were striving toward. Adam failed, Noah failed, Abraham, Moses, and David all failed, but Christ did not. Those who belong to the New Covenant of Christ can stand boldly, with God's law written on their hearts, knowing they are held firm in the better and everlasting promises of God.

CHAPTER 5

SERMON 4: A BETTER SANCTUARY (HEB 9:1-15)

Introduction

The sanctuary (tabernacle or tent of meeting) is one of the most significant typological features of the Old Testament.¹ The tabernacle served as a touchpoint between Israel and the Lord. It was a place for man to meet with his creator. But it was also more than that. The tabernacle was a signpost. The sanctuary was an arrow that pointed to something even greater, a better meeting place.

The author of Hebrews provided a snapshot of the Old Testament sanctuary and its ornaments, then explained the greater ministry of Christ to which it pointed. The sanctuary, the lampstand, the table and the bread, the altar of incense, and the ark of the covenant were all purposefully designed to foreshadow the coming Messiah. When Jesus came to the earth he mirrored and fulfilled the ministry of the sanctuary and each one of its ornaments.

The purpose of this sermon is to show the Old Testament sanctuary as an expression of God's holiness, man's inadequacy, and Christ's perfection. The sermon will express the typological nature of the sanctuary and its ornaments while seeking to convince the congregation that the true sanctuary is not a building to which the world is brought but the Lord Jesus and the church on which he has poured his Spirit. When the modern church begins to recognize Christ as the fulfilment of the sanctuary, the idea

¹ This sermon uses the term "sanctuary" in reference to both the tabernacle and the temple for two reasons: First, the term encompasses the author of Hebrews' theological understanding, that the principles set forth by the tabernacle continue through the temple in all its iterations. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 182, 195. Second, "sanctuary" is a better term for helping a congregation understand the role of the tabernacle/temple in today's New Covenant context.

should change their perception of both vocational ministry and their own responsibility to evangelize. When we understand how the sanctuary typological structures are fulfilled in the New Covenant era, we will see the role of ordained leadership as building and training a congregation to take the gospel message into the world. The main church service is no longer seen as the most effective way to reach the outside culture, but it is for the edification of the saints.² The people themselves, not the Sunday morning program, are God's intended means of bringing the lost to know him. A church with a right view of Christ as the fulfilment of the sanctuary is more easily led to engage the lost than one that believes the sanctuary ministry takes place within the confines of a church building.

Sermon 4

My mentor in pastoral ministry told me of an embarrassing encounter he witnessed in one of his past churches. A young man entered the church building wearing a baseball cap, preparing to attend a worship service. As he was walking through the door, a deacon met the young man and started giving him a hard time about his choice of attire. The deacon said to him, "You are not about to walk into the sanctuary, into God's house, wearing a baseball cap are you?" The young man responded in a sarcastic tone as he pointed to the surrounding church building, "This? This is not God's house." The young man then left the church building and my mentor never saw him again.

You may have your own opinions about whether someone should wear a ball cap to a worship service, but the young man in this story was not wrong in his response. His statement highlights an important theological question, what is God's house? Today's church needs to understand the biblical role of the sanctuary, where the concept originated, its initial purpose, and its significance for today's church. This sermon seeks to answer those questions, and in so doing, to expose man's need for a better sanctuary.

² Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 277.

God’s Holiness Expressed through the Sanctuary (vv. 1–5)

Hebrews 9:1 connects the forthcoming discussion on the sanctuary with the author’s previous writing about the New Covenant.³ The sanctuary (first the tabernacle, then the temple) was Israel’s “earthly place of holiness” where its “regulations for worship” were carried out through its accompanying ornaments (Heb 9:1). Scholars and theologians debate how much liberty to take in interpreting the sanctuary and its ornaments. Philo and Josephus leaned heavily on allegory but some modern commentators feel the author of Hebrews did not intend this type of “irresponsible exegesis.”⁴ More likely, given the small amount of space devoted to describing the sanctuary and its ornaments, the author was merely listing these ornaments in order to make a more significant theological point about the tabernacle as a whole. He wanted to impress God’s holiness upon the reader.⁵ The audience of Hebrews, however, likely had a greater background knowledge than today’s average church attender. Therefore, it makes sense in this sermon to give a brief overview of the Old Testament significance of the sanctuary and its ornaments.

The Sanctuary Itself

The Old Testament sanctuary was the earthly dwelling place of God.⁶ Exodus 26 describes exactly how the sanctuary was to be constructed. Each specification was aimed toward the sanctuary’s purpose for worship. One of the key features of the sanctuary was the veil which separated it into two sections—the holy place and the holy of holies. The veil functioned as a barrier between God and man. The author of Hebrews

³ See previous sermon, “A Better Covenant.”

⁴ Donald Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 129.

⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 295.

⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 257.

brings out this point, focusing not so much on the veil's intricate design but on the fact that it divided the sanctuary in two.⁷ The second section, known as the "Most Holy Place" was the dwelling place of God and thus barred sinners from entering. One person, the high priest, was allowed to enter the most holy place only once a year on the day of atonement, and even then he had to first offer a sacrifice for himself and for the sins of the people. The ceremonies of the day of atonement communicated to all Israel that God is holy, different, set apart, and not to be approached at will.⁸

The Lampstand

The first sanctuary ornament listed in Hebrews 9 is the lampstand (menorah). Exodus 25:31–40 provides a description of the lampstand. It was pure gold with three branches coming out of each side of a main stem. The branches and stem each contained flower-like cups designed to hold seven lamps that would provide light for the dark sanctuary at all times. The lamp was to be placed in the first section of the sanctuary, outside the veil, on the south side, opposite the table for the showbread (Exod 26:35). Like everything about the sanctuary, the lampstand was designed to show God's holiness. Its seven branches (seven being the number of completion) represent the perfect illumination of God's truth.⁹ Its pure gold construction was of great theological

⁷William Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47b (Dallas: Word, 1991), 219. Though some find allegory in the mention of the sections, doing so does not exactly follow the argument of the author of Hebrews. His focus was more on the mere existence of the sections and the fact that they each held specific sanctuary ornaments. Ken Schenck, "God Has Spoken: Hebrews' Theology of the Scriptures," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 332.

⁸ Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 35.

⁹ The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* traces the significance of the number seven through Scripture. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), s.v. "seven."

significance. Gold throughout Scripture is symbolic of value, permanence, and durability, making it an important metal in the formation of many of the sanctuary ornaments.¹⁰

The Table and the Bread

The next sanctuary ornament mentioned in Hebrews 9 is the table which held the bread of the Presence. This table stood opposite the lampstand, on the north side, outside of the veil. It was overlaid with gold and was accompanied by gold plates, dishes, and bowls (Ex 25:23–30; 26:35). On the table was placed twelve loaves of unleavened bread in two piles of six. Each pile was dressed with frankincense, replaced once a week on the Sabbath, and was reserved for Aaron and his sons (Lev 24:5–9). This bread was a perpetual reminder of the presence of the Lord. As with the lampstand, the gold table and utensils represent the precious nature of the presence of the Lord with his people. The number of loaves of bread is also significant, representing the twelve tribes of Israel and their covenant with God.¹¹ Leviticus 24:9 explains how God’s holiness is expressed through the sanctuary table and bread, “And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the Lord's food offerings, a perpetual due.” Even the food reserved for God’s priests was designated as holy.

The Altar of Incense

The altar of incense is the next ornament mentioned in Hebrews 9. Exodus 30:1–16 describes the altar as being overlaid with gold and used exclusively for the burning of “authorized” incense in the sanctuary.¹² The author of Hebrews’ placement of

¹⁰ Gold is “valued because of its rarity and difficulty to maintain.” Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “gold.”

¹¹ Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 208.

¹² Exod 30:34-38 provides the recipe for holy incense to be used in the sanctuary. This type of incense is to be used exclusively for worship and for nothing else. Leviticus 10:1–3 recounts the burning of incense in an unauthorized manner by Nadab and Abihu and the punishment that followed.

the altar “behind the second curtain” in the Most Holy place (Heb 9:3–4) which poses some exegetical difficulty. The book of Exodus places the altar in front of the veil, in the Holy Place, not inside of the Most Holy Place.¹³ Since the Most Holy Place was only accessible once a year, it would have been impossible for the priest to carry out his daily duties concerning the altar of incense had it been located within the Most Holy Place. The author of Hebrews was well acquainted with the Old Testament and Jewish practice, so it is not likely he was unaware of the traditional placement of the altar.

Schreiner and Hagner agree that the author of Hebrews was making an exegetical statement by describing the altar as within the Most Holy Place.¹⁴ Throughout Scripture, incense carries with it the connotation of allegiance and worship. For the priests, the incense was meant to be a “miniature replica of the glory-cloud on Mount Sinai.”¹⁵ The sanctuary would be continually filled with the smoke from the incense as a reminder of the presence of the Lord among his people. The author of Hebrews made a close association between the incense as a representation of God’s glory and presence and the activities that were designated for the Most Holy Place. By moving the altar of incense from the first section (where it actually resided) to the Most Holy Place, the author was making the point that the high priest could only move into the Most Holy Place by God’s permission. The holiness of God dictates that man cannot enter his presence unless it is God himself who invites man to enter.¹⁶

This lesson of God’s holiness is one that today’s church must learn well. We do not demand God to show himself or to act. God, in his holiness, is the one who makes

¹³ The placement of the altar of incense is attested both by Old Testament Scripture as well as Jewish tradition. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 260.

¹⁴ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 260; Hagner, *Hebrews*, 128.

¹⁵ Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “incense.”

¹⁶ Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 35.

demands. He demands we submit, we humble ourselves before him, and we petition that he might work in and among us (Matt 23:12; Jas 4:6–7).

The Ark

Inside the Most Holy Place, both according to the author of Hebrews and according the book of Exodus, was the ark of the covenant. Scripture seems to provide competing information on what exactly the ark contained. The author of Hebrews stated that the ark held three things: “a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron’s staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant” (Heb 9:4). The book of Exodus, on the other hand, only dictates the tablets (the testimony) be placed into the ark (Exod 25:16; 40:3). Concerning the jar of manna and the rod, each are commanded in Exodus to be placed “before the testimony” but not into the ark with the testimony (Exod 16:33–34; Num 17:10). Scholars have varying opinions on the author of Hebrews’ decision to place the other items into the ark along with the testimony.¹⁷ Whatever the author’s reason for the placement, his motivations for locating these items as he does is certainly theological.

On top of the ark is the mercy seat, overshadowed by two golden cherubim (Exod 25:18–22). This mercy seat is the place that God would come to meet with the high priest on the Day of Atonement. The cherubim supported God’s invisible presence on the earth as his footstool (1 Chr 28:2).¹⁸ If there is anything on earth that could even symbolically support the presence of God, it would have to be made of the most precious materials (gold), be filled with the most sacred relics (the manna, the staff, and the tablets), and be topped with heavenly beings (cherubim). The ark is a statement that

¹⁷ Some believe the items could have been added later. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 259. Bruce spoke on this possibility, saying, “It is open to anyone to surmise further that, even if they were not originally in the ark, they were put there subsequently for safe keeping. . . . But this would simply be calling upon imagination to take the place of evidence” Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 189.

¹⁸ First Sam 4:4 refers to God as the one “who is enthroned above the cherubim” Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 190.

earth's most valuable materials could only aspire to sit beneath the feet of Almighty God—such is his holiness.

For today's church, the sanctuary reminds us that God is holy. We must never forget this most fundamental truth about our God. God must not be approached flippantly or disrespectfully. Even today, in the New Covenant, we must approach our God with the utmost humility and submission. The book of James reminds us that same message of the Old Testament sanctuary, "'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Submit yourselves therefore to God" (Jas 4:6-7). Yes, God is love (1 John 4:7). Yes, God is full of compassion (1 Pet 5:7). Yes, God seeks to reconcile sinners to himself (Matt 18:12), but if we do not grasp the holiness of God we will be in opposition to him and cannot rightly grasp his love, compassion, or reconciliation.¹⁹ Miss God's holiness and you will miss God himself.

God's holiness dictates how we worship. As the one who invites us into worship, he regulates how we as sinners might approach him. As the Westminster confession states: "the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited to his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture."²⁰

Though the expression of sanctuary ministry has changed since the advent of Christ, God is still the one who invites us into worship. Let us then seek to please him by holding our worship to his standards. May the ordinances of the Lord's supper and baptism be well-explained and regularly practiced (1 Cor 11:26; Matt 28:19). May the

¹⁹ James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 568.

²⁰ The Regulative Principle of Worship dictates that "the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited to his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture." The Westminster Assembly, *The 1647 Westminster Confession of Faith* (Crossville, TN: Puritan Publications, 2014), 188).

music be theologically rich and geared toward congregational singing (Col 3:16). May church membership be held with high regard as purposed by the New Testament standard (Matt 18:15–20). May the regular gathering of God’s people be expected of God’s people (Heb 10:24–2).²¹

Man’s Sinfulness Expressed through the Sanctuary (vv. 6–10)

The phrase, “these preparations having thus been made,” in Hebrews 9:6 leads the reader into one of the author’s main points.²² Man is too sinful to stand in the presence of God. This message of man’s deficiency is built into the architecture of the sanctuary. The structure itself testifies that man is unworthy before God.²³

The author of Hebrews highlighted man’s inadequacy in Hebrews 9:8, reminding the Hebrews that in the Old Testament “the way into the holy places is not yet opened” (Heb 9:8).²⁴ The Old Testament priestly preparations and duties revolved around the segmented status of the sanctuary. In the first section they ministered regularly, tending to the table and the lampstand and offering incense, all while being conspicuously shut out of the second section, the Most Holy Place (Heb 9:6).²⁵ The priests, for the most part, were simply not worthy to tread behind the curtain and into the

²¹ Brandon Keith Moore, “A Biblical and Theological Vision for the Revitalization of Churches” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 91-93.

²² The verb κατασκευάζω connotes that something had been constructed or prepared for a purpose. The sanctuary and its ornaments were made, not as an end unto themselves, but as a means to a greater purpose. Heb 9:6-10 shows the ministry of the priests as inadequate in that “the way into the holy places [was] not yet opened” (9:8) and “according to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper” (9:9). Thus, 9:6 was the author building up to the truth of man’s sin (represented by the priests) and the need for “reformation” of the current sanctuary, which could not account for man’s sin (9:10).

²³ Lane explains, “The Holy Spirit disclosed to the writer that, so long as the front compartment of the tabernacle enjoyed cultic status, access to the presence of God was not yet available to the congregation.” Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 223.

²⁴ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 194-95.

²⁵ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 261.

Most Holy Place. That section of the sanctuary was reserved only for the high priest, only once a year, and only with the blood of a sacrifice (Heb 9:7). The sacrifice accented the severity of man's broken relationship to God. If a person was going to come close to God, even if it was the high priest, something had to die. In addition, the author of Hebrews highlighted the exclusivity of that high priest's interaction with God. Leviticus 16:2 provides the backing for this statement, "and the Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.'" Approaching God in the wrong way or at the wrong time was an offense deserving death, even if it was the right person approaching (like the high priest, Aaron).

Hebrews 9:7 notes that the blood offered by the high priest was for the "unintentional sins of the people." Some scholars believe the author of Hebrews wrongly placed this restriction on the sacrifice, that it was meant for all sins, both intentional and unintentional.²⁶ The Old Testament, however, does treat sins of open defiance differently than those done in ignorance (Num 15:30; Deut 1:43; 17:12–13; Ps 19:13).²⁷

The Old Testament sanctuary, its ornaments, and the rituals of the high priests all provide evidence used by the Holy Spirit to indicate man's inadequacy to approach God (Heb 9:8). Bruce explains that "throughout the age of the old covenant there was no direct access to God."²⁸ The lesson expressed through the symbols of the sanctuary was that access to God is restricted.²⁹ The arrangement of the old sanctuary provided a way to

²⁶ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 435.

²⁷ Schreiner takes the stance that to the author of Hebrews, intentionally defiant sins are "comparable to the apostasy he warns against." Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 262.

²⁸ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 194.

²⁹ The ESV states that the standing first section is "symbolic for the present age." The ESV publishers added clarity to this passage in a footnote, stating that the author was referring to the age that was present while the sanctuary was still standing. In other words, the author of Hebrews was referring to the time of the tabernacle, not his present day.

temporarily satisfy the requirement of ritual holiness before God until a reformation would take place (Heb 9:9–10). The author of Hebrews would shortly explain how this reformation took place through Christ.

The Old Testament sanctuary exposed an inescapable truth about mankind. We do not deserve to stand in God’s presence. A church will not make advancements toward vitality unless they grasp their own sinfulness. People tend to be too self-deceived to grasp this idea on their own. The prophet Jeremiah demonstrated this point. In speaking to the rebellious house of Judah, he wrote that their sin was “written with a pen of iron . . . engraved on the tablet of their heart,” indicting them in the fact that their hearts had become hard to the truth of God (Jer 17:1).³⁰ In the same context, Jeremiah explained that the heart of man is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” He then asked the rhetorical question about man’s heart, “Who can understand it?” The answer Jeremiah was implying is, “No one can understand man’s heart because it is too wicked.” Jeremiah proceeded, speaking for the Lord, to give a more hopeful answer to the question, “I the Lord search the heart and test the mind” (Jer 17:9–10).³¹

Man does not know the wickedness of his own heart, but God does. If a person is going to be made aware of his or her sinfulness, it is going to have to be through the revelation of God’s word. A vital church must be taught the character of God according to the truth of Scripture (Rom 10:14).³² The Old Testament sanctuary and its ornaments that once exposed man’s separation from God are no more. We no longer live in a world where a building or the ornaments of that building give us the foundational truths we need to understand our relationship to the Lord. What we have now are the records of those buildings, working through the Spirit-inspired writings of people like the author of

³⁰ J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 417.

³¹ Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 421-22.

³² Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 42.

Hebrews, to show us our own need for reformation. Though the old sanctuary no longer stands, the author of Hebrews has shown that we all need the same solution to the sinfulness of man. We need the word of God as it points us to Christ.

**The Perfection of Christ Expressed through
the Sanctuary (vv. 11–15)**

Hebrews 9:11 begins a response to 9:1. Hebrews 9:1 is an introduction to the old covenant, earthly place of worship while 9:11 is an introduction to the new covenant, heavenly place of worship. Christ, the perfect high priest, ministered in a “greater and more perfect tent.”³³

The sanctuary and its ornaments exposed the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, and, ultimately the heavenly reality brought about through Christ as the high priest.

The author of Hebrews did not go into great detail about the construction of the sanctuary; instead he focused on the fact that it was built in two sections, separated by a curtain, known as the veil. The veil acts as a barrier between God and man—a barrier which the death of Christ removed (Matt 27:51). All people now have full access to God through Christ. Now that Christ has fulfilled the Old Covenant, the Old Testament sanctuary pictures his ability to destroy the barrier between God and man. Several other parallels between the Old Testament sanctuary and Jesus also exist.

Table 2. Parallels between the Old Testament sanctuary and Christ

<i>Sanctuary</i>	<i>Christ</i>
Place where God met with man	Called “Immanuel,” God with us (Matt 1:23)
Place where the Law was preserved	Came to fulfill the Law (Matt 5:17)
Place where sacrifice was made	Is the “once for all” sacrifice (Heb 7:27)
Place where the priestly family was fed	Is the “bread of life” (John 6:35)
Entrance was placed at the tribe of Judah ³⁴	Jesus “descended” from Judah (Heb 7:14)

³³ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 235-36.

³⁴ Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, 180-83.

Taken together, these parallels show the sanctuary as a type of Christ—a fact which Christ himself confirms in his own ministry (John 2:18–22). As Brevard Childs comments, “The writer of Hebrews is concerned to show that the Old Testament picture of the sanctuary is a testimony to Jesus Christ, whether in its fulfillment or in its abrogation through a more perfect form.”³⁵

Beale makes the claim that the sanctuary is an ectype of the Garden of Eden and points to Jesus as the antitype. The gospels and Paul’s epistles portray Jesus as the last Adam and in doing so provide a basis for his being a caretaker, cultivator, and high-priest just as Adam served a priestly role in the Garden.³⁶ Jesus, as the typological fulfillment of Adam, demonstrated authority over the sanctuary and went beyond Adam’s authority over the Garden in that Jesus actually claimed to be the personification of a new sanctuary.³⁷ In Matthew 12:6 Jesus claims that “something greater than the temple is here.” These arguments are consistent with the author of Hebrews’ assertion that “Christ appeared as a high priest” (Heb 9:11), that he is the “mediator of a new covenant” (Heb 9:15), and that he entered into the heavenly holy places (Heb 9:8). In Christ the sanctuary is fully realized.

Christ is the better sanctuary; therefore, the sanctuary’s ornaments can be examined as signposts designed to point to the better ministry of Christ. The lampstand, which lighted the dark way for those navigating the sanctuary, prefigured Christ as the light of the world (John 8:12). The table with the bread of the Presence, garnished with the frankincense, pointed to Christ who himself was “garnished” with frankincense at his birth (Matt 2:11). He is also called the bread of life (John 6:35), and represents God’s presence with his people (Matt 1:23). The incense, meant to represent God’s cloud of

³⁵ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster, 1974), 544.

³⁶ Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 171.

³⁷ Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 176.

glory prepared hearts for the day Christ would come on “the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30). The ark, as the spot where God would connect with man, showed the fact that one day Jesus would be the spot where man would see God. As Jesus said, “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

Man may be too sinful to approach the holiness of God, but Christ is perfectly and eternally suited to be close to God. To approach Christ is to approach God.³⁸ The author of Hebrews called Christ “the heir of all things . . . the radiance and glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb 1:2–3).

The author recognized Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament sanctuary and contrasted the two. Jesus did not enter by the blood of bulls and goats, as the old sanctuary required, but by his own blood.³⁹ Therefore, his ministry is not temporary, like that of the old sanctuary. He can instead, therefore, provide a permanent redemption. Unlike the old sanctuary, which required repeated sacrifice, Jesus only had to make the offering “once for all” (Heb 9:12). His ministry is not for the purification of the flesh, like that of the old sanctuary, but for purifying the conscience through the Holy Spirit (Heb 9:13–14).⁴⁰ Truly, there is no better message for the church or for a lost world than the fact that Christ bridges the gap between our sinfulness and God’s holiness.

Conclusion

Hebrews 9:15 concludes the author’s arguments concerning Christ’s better sanctuary ministry (Heb 9:11–14). The verse also points back to 9:1, again showing the contrast between the old sanctuary ministry and Christ.⁴¹ The fact that Jesus entered the heavenly sanctuary with the sacrifice of his own blood ratifies the new covenant,

³⁸ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 24.

³⁹ Heb 9:12 is a clear reference to the Day of Atonement as explained in Lev 16. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 222.

⁴⁰ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 201-2.

⁴¹ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 241.

legitimizing his work as the mediator, and solidifying the promise of eternal inheritance for those who are called by his name (Heb 9:15).

The Christ-connection to the sanctuary is not a new concept. Many scholars have explored the idea in a variety of ways. For the sake of the vitality of the local church, however, Christians need to understand their responsibility of living in response to these truths. Though it is great to bring people to a church building so they can be introduced to God, the New Covenant people of Christ are tasked first to leave the church building and bring God to the people by way of evangelism. People do not have to experience the physical lampstand, bread, incense, and a physical sacrifice does not need to be made repeatedly for them. People can experience the Christ those ornaments prefigured, the Christ whose sacrifice was made once and for all. Understanding the concept of Christ as the better sanctuary should motivate Christians to evangelize their lost friends and neighbors, inviting them to know God through Christ. The vital church understands these truths about taking Christ to the world and comes together collectively, regularly (Heb 10:25), not to be pleased with the pleasantries of physical sanctuary ornaments, but to proclaim together the greatness of Christ, encouraging one another, and worshiping their greater sanctuary.

CHAPTER 6

SERMON 5: A BETTER SACRIFICE (HEB 9:16–10:4)

Introduction

The message of Christianity centers around the cross of Christ. For this reason, it is easy for modern churches to take for granted mankind's need for a sacrifice. Preachers and teachers may neglect to explain why sins cannot be forgiven without Christ's sacrifice. Conversely, the concept of God sacrificing his Son on a cross can be horrifying to someone who is unfamiliar with or opposed to Christianity.¹ The author of Hebrews explained, by way of the Old Testament sacrificial system, mankind's need for sacrifice. He demonstrates that the sacrifice of calves and goats could never take away sin. The author of Hebrews explained exactly what Christians and skeptics need to hear today, that we, in our human state, need not just a sacrifice, but the greatest sacrifice. We need Christ on a cross.

Sermon 5

The act of sacrifice has intrinsic value.² Most people understand that some form of sacrifice is necessary for human flourishing. No human can survive unless someone somewhere sacrifices for them. Parents sacrifice personal time and money, even health so their children can grow up. Teachers, coaches, mentors, fellow church members all sacrifice in some manner so someone else might reap the benefits. Sacrifice is important. Mankind requires sacrifice to grow physically, mentally, socially, and

¹ Phil Zuckerman, "Does Christianity Harm Children?" *Psychology Today*, August 4, 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-secular-life/201408/does-christianity-harm-children>.

² Jorg Loschke, "The Value of Sacrifices," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 26, no. 3 (2018): 399-418.

emotionally. The author of Hebrews spoke to mankind’s need for sacrifice and made the case that man approach the Lord without sacrifice. Hebrews 9:16–10:4 shows that a saving relationship with God is impossible without sacrifice—particularly, without Jesus Christ on a cross.

The Need for a Sacrifice

One of the key doctrines of Christianity is the necessity of an atoning sacrifice. Because the doctrine is so fundamental to the Christian faith, many (especially those who grew up going to church) may have never asked why sacrifice is necessary. Many ancient religious rituals included animal sacrifice of some kind.³ This fact forces us to ask, “What is the appeal of sacrifice? Why has humanity in almost every ancient culture offered sacrifice to god(s)?”.

Martin Selman, in the book *Sacrifice in the Bible*, explored some of the sacrificial habits of the Ancient Near East. He stated, “Deities and spirits were felt to have human needs and depended on human beings to meet them, while conversely humanity relied on well-fed gods as a necessary basis for power and blessing.” Selman went on to explain that these ritual sacrifices were aimed much more at attaining some blessing from the gods than trying to please the gods themselves.⁴ This attitude behind ancient near eastern sacrifice provides insight for the appeal to the practice of sacrifice. Man has tended toward the idea that offerings to a deity will bring some kind of reward. The author of Hebrews does not deny that reward often comes from sacrifice. He acknowledges that there is an inheritance (a reward) involved, but the rationale behind biblical sacrifice, unlike those of other Ancient Near Eastern religions, is based much more on the glory and satisfaction of God rather than the reward man might obtain.

³ Richard E. DeMaris, “Sacrifice, and Ancient Mediterranean Ritual,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 43, no. 2 (2013): 60.

⁴ Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman, *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 90-96.

Inheritance Requires Death (vv. 16-17)

Hebrews 9:16 opens up a parenthetical discussion explaining the need for Christ's sacrifice.⁵ The verse references the previous section by explaining how the redeemed receive an inheritance from God. Hebrews 9:16–17 states that a death must occur before a will can go into effect.⁶ This idea is not foreign at all to the modern mind. Most adult children in this country know they will one day receive an inheritance, but not until their parents die. Apparently, the audience of Hebrews had a similar understanding of inheritance and will and testament. The author spoke into his audience's apparent knowledge so they would consider how their heavenly inheritance might be received. Hebrews 9:15 references the promised inheritance of Christ's redeemed, setting the stage for the necessity of a death. The inheritance does not take effect "as long as the one who made it is alive" (Heb 9:17).

In addition to the logical argument that someone has to die before an inheritance goes into effect, the author of Hebrews also made use of his audience's knowledge of Old Testament covenant rituals to show the necessity of death. The ratification of an Old Testament covenant took place only when the ratifier was symbolically put to death by way of by way of an animal substitute (Ps 50:5). As was the case with the Abrahamic Covenant, the message of the covenant sacrifice was that anyone who transgresses the covenant would receive the same fate as the dead, broken animals (see sermon, "A Better Covenant").⁷

⁵ William Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47b (Dallas: Word, 1991), 242.

⁶ Schreiner explains that some commentators take a stance opposed to many interpreters in claiming the author was referencing not to a will but a covenant. The context, however, favors the use of will over covenant. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation: Commentary on Hebrews* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 276.

⁷ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 243.

God's Covenants Require Blood (vv. 18-21)

Hebrews 9:18 is a progression from the previous discussion concerning inheritance, will, and sacrifice.⁸ Since the first covenant was only ratified through sacrifice, blood became symbolic of its inauguration. The author provided Moses' ministry as an example. In the Old Testament sacrificial system any object or person used for worship had to be symbolically cleansed with blood. The author of Hebrews referenced Exodus 24:6–8, and Leviticus 14:4, 7 to back his point: “And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words’” (Exod 24:6–8). “The priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two live clean birds and cedarwood and scarlet yarn and hyssop. . . . And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease. Then he shall pronounce him clean and shall let the living bird go into the open field” (Lev 24:4, 7).⁹ The point of the Levitical ritual was to show that not just any ordinary thing could be used to worship God.¹⁰ The blood took priority in the cleansing ritual. Whatever was used in the act of worshiping God had to be purified by means of the most precious substance, the substance that represented

⁸ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 243.

⁹ Bruce explains that the use of hyssop is linked to the spreading of the blood of the paschal lamb over the Israelite doorways and the water and scarlet wool are linked to the sacrifice of the red heifer in Num 19. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 215. The priest was to slaughter the heifer outside the camp, a ritual the author of Hebrews associated with Jesus in Heb 13:12.

¹⁰ Morales notes that the blood acted as a purifying agent to the sanctuary objects, cleansing them from the sins of the Israelite worshipers. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 130.

life itself.¹¹ The message was that God’s commandments, God’s laws, are a matter of life and death. As discussed in the previous sermon, “A Better Sanctuary,” the whole Old Testament sacrificial system was meant to show the seriousness of interactions with a holy God. The author of Hebrews reiterated this seriousness by showing the necessity of blood.¹²

Today’s church, in its efforts to seem comfortable and familiar, must be careful not to diminish the gravity of God’s covenant.¹³ Just as the shedding of blood is a weighty matter, so too is the new covenant. Understanding the seriousness of the situation does not mean a church should refrain from making meaningful contact with the lost world; it means the church should do what it can to introduce the lost world to the truth of God’s covenant. The world needs to know the covenant is a matter of life and death rather than comfort and familiarity.

Forgiveness Is Costly (v. 22)

Verse 22 wraps up the previous section (Heb 9:15–21) by reiterating the author’s main points, “almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” Forgiveness is costly. The price of forgiveness in God’s eyes is death. The author does offer a qualification by explaining that blood is used to purify “*almost* everything.” There was some provision under the Old Covenant for purification apart from blood. Leviticus 5:11–13 allowed for flour to be used by the impoverished who could not afford an animal sacrifice, and Numbers 31:22–23

¹¹ Schreiner points out the fact that forgiveness comes through the shedding of blood not because of the life that is in the blood but because of the death that results from the absence of blood. This distinction is necessary because the author of Hebrews was building up to the substitutionary death of Christ as it was prefigured by the death of the animal sacrifice. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 279–80.

¹² Donald Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 144–45.

¹³ Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 119.

mentioned purification by means of fire and water.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the author of Hebrews stated three times in Hebrews 9 that forgiveness is not obtained without blood (vv. 7, 18, 22). The extenuating circumstances mentioned in Leviticus 5:11–13 and Numbers 31:22–23 do not negate the rule.

From the beginning, God wanted man to understand how much forgiveness costs. In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve committed the first sin against God. One of the immediate results of their sin was shame in their nakedness (Gen 3:7). Even as God pronounced judgment upon Eve and then Adam, clues to his forgiveness begin to emerge. God promised Eve would not die immediately but would have offspring and that one day her offspring (realized in Christ) would bruise the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15).¹⁵ To Adam, God also promised he would not die immediately, but that he would continue to work the ground in pain and sweat (Gen 3:17–19). Something, however, would have to die immediately. A sacrifice was made. Genesis 3:21 explains that God himself made garments of skins for Adam and Eve. The first death in the Bible, in history, was at the hands of God. The result of the death was that Adam and Eve would be covered in the shame of their nakedness. This act of God can be seen as a sign of forgiveness at the cost of a life.¹⁶

Throughout history, God impressed the fact of costly forgiveness upon man—the price of forgiveness is the basis for the whole Old Testament sacrificial system. C. S. Lewis, in an essay on forgiveness, explained the difference between excusing sin and

¹⁴ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 246.

¹⁵ Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 68.

¹⁶ Wenham claims the act of clothing Adam and Eve was not an act of grace but a reminder of sinfulness, that Adam and Eve could not approach God unclothed. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 85. If Wenham is correct in asserting that God was reminding Adam and Eve of sin, his view does not exclude God's providing the skin as an act of grace. God provided the skin for Adam and Eve so they might understand their need for a certain propriety before him, but he did not dismiss them completely. He graciously provided for Adam and Eve despite their sin.

forgiving it. His point was that real sin cannot be merely excused. Excusing sin is only reserved for the times when no one is at direct fault.¹⁷ The author of Hebrews made this same point about sin; it can never be merely excused. Sin has to be fully recognized through the costly process of death before it can be forgiven.

If today's church does not recognize what it costs to forgive, we will miss the heart of the gospel. If forgiveness is cheap, if forgiveness is simply excusing sin without sacrifice, then the gospel, the fact that God's only Son died on a cross, is not a message of hope but a message of God's cruelty.¹⁸ The message a vital church must preach to the world is that there is no covenant without sacrifice, that forgiveness is costly, and that the kind of forgiveness mankind really needs requires the most precious sacrifice.

The Need for Christ's Sacrifice

So why must Jesus be sacrificed for our forgiveness? Why is it that the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin?

Heavenly Inheritance Requires Divine Death (v. 23)

Hebrews 9:23 references the previous discussion about the necessity of blood and sacrifice for earthly purity.¹⁹ The author introduced an *a priori* argument; if the lesser items, the "copies of the heavenly things," had to be purified by mere animal death, it would take a much greater death to purify "the heavenly things themselves." It is important at this time to define these "heavenly things." Scholars disagree on the author's meaning.

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory; and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 179.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas explains that Jesus suffered on the cross of his own free will in the fact that Jesus, as the Son of God, "willed from eternity to assume flesh and to suffer for us." Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 1–5* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 181.

¹⁹ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 282.

Bruce claims the heavenly things are God's people in need of cleansing.²⁰ Lane claims the heavenly sanctuary itself needed to be cleansed for it had become defiled.²¹ Schreiner refutes both of these views and states, while the author is in fact referring to heaven, one does not need to infer that heaven had been defiled, "the imagery should not be pressed, as if somehow heaven itself is defiled by human sin. The writer uses spatial and typological language to communicate the effectiveness of Christ's sacrifice, but it is unwarranted to conclude that he actually believes there are heavenly places that actually need cleansing."²² The author's language is analogical. The thrust of his argument is not the object that needs purification but the need for a better means of purification. His point is not that heaven needs purification but that the New Covenant requires a better sacrifice.

The author has a sound argument—earthly purification requires an earthly death; heavenly purification requires a heavenly death, a divine death. The Apostle Paul used similar logic in 1 Corinthians 15:48–49 to describe the resurrection of Christ's people. Man, as an earthly being has been given an earthly body in Adam and is suited for an earthly existence. A heavenly existence requires a heavenly body in Christ.²³ The author of Hebrews showed Christ's divine sacrifice sufficient to purify heaven. Paul showed Christ (by implication, the sacrifice of Christ) as sufficient to purify Christ-followers for heaven. The man of the dust, the man born merely of Adam, is suited for

²⁰ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 218.

²¹ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 247.

²² Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 283.

²³ Those who belong to the New Covenant are a New Creation, prepared for heaven by Christ. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1282.

the dust (Gen 3:19), while the man of heaven, the man bearing the heavenly image, is suited for heaven.²⁴

Everyone who hears the truths of this Scripture should be both humbled and inspired. These truths show that sin is incredibly destructive to a relationship to God. Sin defiles us to the point that the only kind of sacrifice that can cleanse us has to be of the highest quality. God took the most precious thing he could give, the life of his Son, and used it to wipe up our filth. Again, this revelation is humbling; it is also, however, a very inspiring picture of our worth before the Lord. God, in his holy wisdom, saw fit to redeem man, not simply to *make* him in the image of God (Gen 1:27) but also to *redeem* him in the image of God by means of Christ's sacrifice (1 Cor 15:48–49).²⁵

Christ's Covenant Required His Own Blood (vv. 24-27; 10:1-4)

The author continued his argument in verses 24–27, using conjunctions to link each verse to the previous one. The argument proceeds in the following fashion: (1) Christ did not offer his sacrifice in man-made places but in heaven (Heb 9:24). (2) His sacrifice did not repeat, like OT animal sacrifices, but was instead a one-time sacrifice of himself (Heb 9:25–26). (3) His one-time sacrifice corresponds to man's one-time judgement (Heb 9:27). These verses show the perfect work of Christ's blood. He made his sacrifice in heaven, the most excellent place, in the most excellent way. He executed his offering so perfectly that it only had to happen once. That one sacrifice was sufficient to carry man safely through death and judgment.²⁶

²⁴ Thiselton states, "The first man is 'from earth's soil, made from dust': the second man is from heaven. The one from dust is the model for people of dust; the one from heaven models those who pertain to heaven. Even as we have worn the image of him who was formed from earth's dust, so we shall wear also the image of the heavenly one." Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1258.

²⁵ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 826.

²⁶ Lane states, "The issue in Christ's life is settled." Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 251.

The author, in this section dealing with the blood of Christ's sacrifice, revisited several earlier themes from Hebrews. Jesus' work pertains to the true holy place, heaven, of which the earthly sanctuary is a copy (Heb 9:24; 8:2, 5; 9:11–12). He resides in the presence of the Father on man's behalf (Heb 9:24; 1:3; 7:25; 8:2). His sacrifice does not need to be repeated (Heb 9:25–26; 7:27; 9:7). He ministers at the end of the ages (Heb 9:26; 1:2). The author would again reiterate these themes in 10:1–4, showing the law as a shadow, a copy, of good things to come and Christ as the superior, one-time sacrifice. It makes sense for the author of Hebrews to revisit these biblical concepts in light of Christ's sacrifice because Christ's blood inaugurates the New Covenant and fulfills Old Testament doctrines.²⁷

Just as the earthly sacrifice of bulls and goats was sufficient for earthly places but not heavenly places, Christ's covenant required something more than the blood of bulls and goats. An everlasting covenant necessitated the blood of Christ, an eternal being. Even if another human's blood had been offered instead of a mere animal's, it would not have been sufficient because the blood of Christ contains the supernatural life of God. Christ's blood is thus superior to any and all other blood.²⁸ Inaugurating a superior covenant could only be done by the blood of Christ, a lesson most clearly displayed by Christ himself in the institution of the Lord's Supper, when he said, "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28).

Hebrews 9:26 references Christ's suffering in his sacrifice. Forgiveness comes at a great cost, a cost paid by Christ. Leviticus 17:11 explains that the blood of sacrifice serves to "make atonement for your souls." Jesus' willing sacrifice evidences the doctrine

²⁷ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 674.

²⁸ The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* explains that "John expresses Christ's divinity in blood imagery. Christ blood contained life from God in a way that normal human blood did not. To experience eternal life, the believer must drink his blood (John 6:53–54)." Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), s.v. "blood."

of penal substitutionary atonement. He offered himself upon the cross in our stead, bearing the wrath brought about by our sin, and thus sufficiently paying what we cannot pay.²⁹ Jesus hung on the cross, calling out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?,” indicating his suffering God’s wrath while giving “his life a ransom for many” (Matt 27:46; Mark 10:45).³⁰

The superiority of the blood of Christ’s sacrifice has huge implications for the church. The author of Hebrews gave warnings to the church throughout the letter so they would understand the seriousness of salvation and cling tightly to Christ (Heb 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; 12:14–29).³¹ In 9:24–27 the author explains why the blood of Christ’s sacrifice is adequate to secure such a salvation. Christ appeared “at the end of the ages,” and his one sacrifice is sufficient to “put away sin” (Heb 9:26). The putting away of sins has been completed. This idea echoes Jesus’ last words on the cross, “it is finished,” τετέλεσται. When Jesus offered his blood in sacrifice, his action completed everything necessary for the forgiveness of all sins.

For the church, Christ’s sacrifice offers us incredible security in salvation. Those who belong to Christ had all their sins paid for before they were ever born. This acknowledgement is important because many Christians wrestle with anxiety in the face of an ongoing struggle with sin. This anxiety can even lead to a crisis of faith, but it need not be so. Sin, all sin, has already been paid for perfectly in the blood of Christ. The Apostle Paul dealt with this kind of anxiety when he said, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?,” but he also acknowledged the strength of

²⁹ Robert Bruce Jamieson III, “Purging God’s People and Place: Levitical Sacrifice as a Prolegomenon to Hebrews” (MA thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 63.

³⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1076.

³¹ James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 518-19.

Christ's sacrifice, saying, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 7:24, 8:1).

Christians may wrestle with sin as Paul did, but they should also cling to the same promise to which Paul clung. There is no condemnation for Christ's people because his blood is sufficient to put away sins once and for all. C. S. Lewis, in his essay on the forgiveness of Christ, stated, "A great deal of our anxiety to make excuses comes from not really believing in [the forgiveness of sin]. . . . Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has [forgiven] it."³² A revitalized church is one that realizes these truths about Christ's sacrifice, that his blood is sufficient to provide real and lasting forgiveness. Thus, a church with this mindset does not have to continue wrestling with past sins and insufficient ideas of forgiveness. This kind of church can instead move forward toward maturity and help others to do the same.

The Cost of Forgiveness Is Paid and Anticipates Christ's Return (v. 28)

Believing in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice, believing in the truth of his words and his work, necessitates believing in his return. The author of Hebrews stated explicitly that Christ "will appear a second time." His appearance will not be to pay again for sin but to consummate salvation for his people, for those who "eagerly [wait] for him" (Heb 9:28).³³ Jesus alluded to this fact just after he explained to his disciples that the New Covenant would be made in his blood in Matthew 26:28. He said he would not, "drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when [he would] drink it new with [them] in [his] Father's kingdom." He was speaking of the eschatological consummation

³² Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 180.

³³ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 287.

of the heavenly kingdom.³⁴ Though his blood would inaugurate the New Covenant, Christ would appear a second time to consummate it.³⁵ Revelation 19:6–9 displays this consummation:

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”

The author of Hebrews explained the truth about Christ’s sacrifice and his second coming to encourage his readers.³⁶ Today’s church needs this same kind of encouragement when considering the cost of Christ’s sacrifice. God, in Christ, offered the most precious, most valuable thing he had to offer. He offered himself in the form of Christ to forgive those who would follow him.³⁷ The church has been made ready for heaven by the spilling of divine blood and at the cost of a divine sacrifice. Those who believe this truth about Christ’s sacrifice will be like those the author spoke of who “are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb 9:28). This is the kind of knowledge that does not just change the way a person thinks; it changes the way a person lives. This kind of knowledge revitalizes a person to live for the sake of Christ’s coming kingdom, and when Christ’s people are revitalized, the church is revitalized.

I recently saw this revitalized mindset take hold of a young father in our church. He grew up as a Roman Catholic and served as a medic for the U.S. military. He

³⁴ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 508.

³⁵ The Gospels and Hebrews both display the “already, not yet” nature of Christ’s atonement, the inaugurated eschatology. Alan J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke’s Account of God’s Unfolding Plan* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 40.

³⁶ Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 508.

³⁷ The author of Hebrews describes Christ in Heb 1:3 as “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” as a way of expressing the inseparable purpose and being of God the Father and God the Son. Hagner, *Hebrews*, 24.

exuded a sense of duty and responsibility toward his superiors, particularly toward God. He did not, however, understand the saving sacrifice of Christ.

Upon exposure to the doctrine of Jesus' gracious sacrifice, he surrendered to Christ as Lord, but our Baptist church made him uncomfortable in a lot of ways. He was unfamiliar with the songs, most of the people were from a very different background than him, and he felt his past life was more sinful than everyone else's. I talked to him about his discomfort one day and he explained why he continued to come to church despite the obstacles. He replied, "I know you all have the truth about God and Christ, and I'm willing to work through the discomfort so I can be close to that truth." What this man said about Christ and the church reveals the kind of remade heart that is crucial for a revitalized church. He has the kind of eager expectation the author of Hebrews described. He understands the great price God paid to forgive him and it affects him to the core. His understanding causes him to "draw near" to Christ as the one who can "make perfect" those who accept his one-time sacrifice (Heb 10:1; 9:28). A church full of people whose hearts have been molded to see the privilege of drawing near as greater than any secondary discomfort is a revitalized church indeed.

Conclusion

The author of Hebrews made the case that forgiveness of sins requires a sacrifice and that the once-for-all forgiveness offered in the New Covenant required the highest sacrifice — the Son of God himself. A heavenly inheritance comes at the cost of divine blood. Anyone brought under the New Covenant of Christ is saved through his sacrifice and eagerly awaits his coming. A vital church is characterized by an attitude of eager waiting. A church full of people atoned for by the sacrifice of Christ is focused on things associated with Christ's coming, heavenly things. These people are steadfast in the world and compassionate toward sinners. They care about holiness and forgiveness. They are focused not on their own needs and satisfaction but the needs of those around them

and that the world may be satisfied in Christ. A vital church focuses on the glory of God in Christ, seeking and awaiting his kingdom above all else.

CHAPTER 7

SERMON 6: THE BETTER WORK OF CHRIST (HEB 10:5-39; 13:1-25)

Introduction

This sermon explores the relationship between the person of Christ and his work. Just as the apostle Paul often opened his epistles with theological foundations before applying those principles later in his letter, the author of Hebrews has saved his primary application points for the end. Theology is designed to affect our hearts, not just our heads. Good theology should also influence our hands—changing our deeds and actions. A proper understanding of Christ should have a measurable effect on a congregation. A church is only revitalized when it understands Christ’s person and work and begins to live like Christ lives.

Sermon 6

Throughout history, man has searched for ways to fix his own brokenness. We have worked diligently to remedy our flawed nature. We have invented elixirs and drugs, snake oils and tonics. We have devised strange contraptions to stretch, pull, pressurize, and even freeze ourselves. We have replaced, injected, massaged, rejuvenated, and lasered every part of our bodies. We have built hospitals, universities, think tanks, and other research facilities. We have tried to grasp the impossible and make ourselves incorruptible in order to make mankind right.

But our labors have failed. We still get sick and we still die; we still mistreat one another. We may be able to temporarily prolong life and beauty or find a way to make some people care somewhat for others, but we have yet to come up with a permanent solution to the broken state of humanity.

This sermon deals man's failure to right himself both in his own eyes and in the eyes of God. I will explore several chapters of Hebrews, focusing particularly on chapters 10 and 13. Through the exposition of Scripture, it will become apparent that man's work is insufficient to achieve eternal life and peace while Christ's work brings about everything for which man has been striving.

Man's Work Is Not Sufficient (10:5-11)

Hebrews 10:5 begins a section in which the author contrasts Christ's sacrificial work with man's insufficient work.¹ Verses 5–10 expose the problems inherent in man's work and Christ as the great solution. God has not desired man's sacrifices and offerings. The author of Hebrews referenced Psalm 40:6–8, in which David, while waiting patiently for the Lord's deliverance, realized it is not man's physical act of sacrifice that pleases God. Hebrews 10:5 shows that the solution to man's insufficient work in sacrifice is God's preparation of Christ's body as the perfect sacrifice. Verse 7 explains that Christ came for the purpose of carrying out God's will "as it is written in the scroll of the book." The implications of that last phrase are hard to understand fully but it is likely that the author was referencing Christ as destined to give himself perfectly to God's will, something David could never do.² It is also important to note that it was Christ's good pleasure to do the will of the Father.³ He was not forced, but wanted to carry out God's will.

Verses 8–9 reiterate verses 5–7 while clarifying that the author was speaking of man's insufficient work "according to the law" and that Christ's sacrificial work was meant to supersede to the work of the law, "he does away with the first in order to

¹ William Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47b (Dallas: Word, 1991), 262.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews: Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 299.

³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1076.

establish the second.”⁴ These are the means by which man is “sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10).

Verse 11 gets to the heart of the problem of man’s work. The author, in reference to his own words in 5:1, 9:9, and 10:1, 4, explained that the Old Testament priests toiled daily in offering sacrifices, but they could never take away sins. The priests spent a large amount of time preparing and slaughtering animals for sacrifice, but their work was never complete. The priests would atone for sin with a sacrifice but because mankind sins constantly there would be an immediate need for sacrifice again.⁵ Like bailing out a leaky boat, the work was never complete.

The Old Covenant sacrificial system was only designed to temporarily stave off God’s wrath. It was never meant to permanently solve the problem of human sin.⁶ Old Covenant priests were never sufficient to do what Christ would later achieve through the New Covenant. The author of Hebrews would again in verses 16–17 reference Jeremiah 31:31–34 (as he had in Heb 8:10), showing the fact that Christ brought about a new covenant and with it a new work that does what man’s work could never do. Christ’s work permanently removes man’s lawlessness from God’s memory.⁷

There is no direct comparison in this instance between the lives of the early readers of Hebrews and the lives of the people of today’s church. Modern Christians are under no pressure to abide by Old Covenant laws as was the Hebrew congregation. Christians today are, however, tempted to think that working hard and establishing our

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 235.

⁵ Hagner points out the fact that the priest standing in Heb 10:11 is indicative of the never ending work in which he is engaged. Donald Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 159.

⁶ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 303.

⁷ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 269.

own righteousness earns God's blessings.⁸ Today's church, if not careful, can easily slip into the mindset that doing good will automatically be reciprocated with a tangible reward from the Lord. Here are some examples of this mindset: "God brought me through this tough time in my life because he is preparing me for prosperity and comfort in the near future." "I have to pay my 'spiritual dues' right now so I can be rewarded later." "I will offer up the sacrifice of my discomfort, my religious devotion, my prayers, etc., and if I am faithful I will earn favor with God, and he will give me the life I want."

Some church members might even use biblical language to aid their faulty reasoning, "I am walking through my wilderness right now because God is leading me into my promised land," or, "I am standing against my Goliath and if I'm faithful the Lord will grant me the victory I desire."⁹ Some may make the same error through different reasoning, feeling they have done so much in their life to displease God that they must work hard in righteousness to atone for their own sins. The author of Hebrews made clear that man's attempt to atone for sins, even in the way prescribed by God under the Old Covenant sacrificial system, was not sufficient.¹⁰

No one can work hard enough to make up for offending God.¹¹ Thus, as Hebrews states, God takes no "pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings

⁸ Erik Raymond explains a line of thinking has gone beyond a clear-cut prosperity gospel in America. It is more subtle, harder to spot, and very active in today's church. Raymond calls this thinking the "soft" prosperity gospel. It "wears the uniform of honor, happiness, and achievement" and espouses the same falsehoods as a more blatant prosperity gospel, that God will reward faithfulness with tangible blessings. Erik Raymond, "The Soft Prosperity Gospel," Ligonier Ministries, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/soft-prosperity-gospel/>.

⁹ The prevalence of this mindset in today's church necessitates drawing out these examples. The congregation needs to see the subtle ways in which these thoughts can creep into the minds of even devout Christians.

¹⁰ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 238.

¹¹ Bruce views the description here as a more serious or inexcusable act for which there is no forgiveness. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 258-59. Schreiner explains the apostasy further, pointing out that it is comprised of three offenses: a deliberate shunning of the gospel, rejecting the New Covenant by way of profaning Christ's blood, and rejecting or blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 326.

and sin offerings” (Heb 10:8).¹²

The priest’s work, though never ending, could never accomplish the work that needed to be done on man’s behalf. (Heb 10:11). Strikingly, this point is true even though the sacrificial system was established by God himself. God implemented this Old Covenant system when he told the Israelites, through Moses, to keep a daily sacrifice (Num 28:1–8). The system was set up to temporarily make provision for sin and to show man the futility of working to try to satisfy God’s righteousness.¹³ The system was designed to make man yearn for someone or something that could perform the work that man could not.

Christ’s Is the Better Work Man Needs (10:12-21)

Hebrews 10:12 begins a short explanation of what Christ did on the cross.¹⁴ Where the priests of old offered sacrifices repeatedly (Heb 10:11), Christ offered himself once and sat down at the right hand of God, indicating a completed action. The author’s words support Jesus’ declaration on the cross, “it is finished” (John 19:30). Yet according to the author, we still await a full consummation of Christ’s work. A time when “his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet” (Heb 10:13). This representation of Christ’s work as complete but awaiting consummating reflects the already/not yet eschatological structure of the rest of the New Testament. Jesus’ work was completed on the cross, but its full eschatological effects are yet to be consummated.¹⁵

¹² The author was warning the reader against continuing to offer sacrifices according to the law of Moses. Those sacrifices were offensive to God. He took no pleasure in them, and to continue to deliberately offer them was to profane the blood of the New Covenant.

¹³ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 299.

¹⁴ Heb 9:16–10:4 explains in greater detail the necessity and efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice. See sermon 5, “A Better Sacrifice.”

¹⁵ Alan J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke’s Account of God’s Unfolding Plan* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 40.

Jesus came into this world to do a work that resembled Old Covenant sacrifice but was far superior and rendered the old system obsolete. An old house with cast-iron pipes might need constant maintenance to keep water flowing. Replacing those cast iron pipes with PVC pipes is not a work wholly different from that of maintaining the cast iron, but it is a superior work that eliminates the need for the constant maintenance on the old pipes. Such is the work of Christ in the New Covenant. Old Covenant priests and sacrifices were mere shadows of his vastly superior work.

The author of Hebrews walks readers through Jesus' greater work: (1) He replaced the obedience of the Old Testament sacrificial system with his own personal obedience (Heb 10:5–7). (2) His work sanctified his followers, presenting them as righteous before God (v. 10). (3) He acted as the high priest for mankind, giving the one sacrifice that would secure his children for all eternity, perfecting them for all time (vv. 12, 14). (4) He set the course for the defeat of all his enemies (v. 13). The defeat of Christ's enemies might be likened to a hostile group of people targeted for a missile strike. The launch button has been pressed and the rockets are in the air; they only have yet to land. Christ's ultimate victory is imminent but not yet fully arrived.

Verse 15 begins a discussion on the great work of Christ as it bears witness through the Holy Spirit. In referencing Jeremiah 31:31–34, the author brought to light the differences between the old, Mosaic covenant and the New Covenant so the reader might understand Christ's work as superior to the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant law was given by Moses and written on stone (Exod 31:18). The New Covenant law is given by the Holy Spirit and written on hearts (Heb 10:16). The Old Covenant brought about daily remembrances of sin as sacrifices were offered repeatedly (Num 28:1–8). Under the New Covenant, there is no remembrance of sin (Heb 10:17). The Old Covenant required the constant work of offering before the Lord (Num 28:1–8). In the New Covenant of Christ, the work is done and there is no longer a need for sin offering (Heb 10:18).

The author of Hebrews provided a powerful image for today's church. Using the words of Jeremiah, writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the author showed the characteristics of a revitalized heart.¹⁶ Those who belong to Christ have an inseparable connection to his perfect work. Christ's work is written on their hearts; their sins are forgotten, and they can stop trying to pay some kind of penance to God.¹⁷ Their work is done because Christ's work is sufficient to establish their righteousness before God and open access between them and the Father.

Verse 19 signals a shift in emphasis from a theological discussion to a practical response of faith.¹⁸ The author does, however, first provide a short summation of Christ's superior work: (1) He offered His blood. (2) He opened the way to the "holy places" by the curtain of his flesh (torn on the cross).¹⁹ (3) He acts as a "great priest over the house of God." As a result of Christ's actions, those who belong to him "have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus," an idea the author of Hebrews already posited in 4:16. The revitalized church, filled with vital Christians is a church that moves forward confidently into the work of Christ.

Today's church must grasp firmly to the perfect work of Christ, realizing that only as we cling to him will our work in this world be truly significant. Mankind has worked hard since the beginning of time to give ourselves a lasting name, to stir up what we believe to be good works, but we have failed. We see this attitude in Cain when his face fell after being rejected for what he thought was a good offering (Gen 4:5).²⁰ We see

¹⁶ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 160.

¹⁷ I am referring to a much broader category than just those with Roman Catholic penance in mind. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 416. Plenty of evangelicals in today's churches feel that they need to somehow pay God back for their sins.

¹⁸ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 282.

¹⁹ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 164.

²⁰ Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, New American Commentary, vol. 1A (Nashville: B & H, 1996), 267-68.

this attitude in the building of the Tower of Babel as men gathered to declare their good work and their good name while rejecting God’s command to spread his glory throughout the earth (Gen 11:4).²¹

Mankind has worked hard to do what we can never do, to have an everlasting name, to work ourselves past the veil and into the holy place. We must recognize that Christ did the work for us. He came to earth and accomplished what we could never accomplish, and now allows us to participate in his work. The apostle Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 15:56–57 that, “the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Christ’s victory, his successful work can be the work of all who belong to him.

**Draw Near to Christ and Be Counted in His Work
(10:22-25, 32-39; 13:1-25)**

The author of Hebrews, after summarizing the great work of Christ in verses 19–21, explained that his work becomes the work of his followers. Jesus did not sacrifice himself on the cross so his church could sit back and be comfortable. He saved his church so they might join in his work of advancing the gospel to the ends of the earth. The church has become co-workers with Christ. Verse 22 begins a series of three exhortations that explain what the church should do as Christ’s coworkers: (1) Draw near (10:22). (2) Hold fast the confession of hope (10:23). (3) Consider “how to stir up one another to love and good works (10:24–25).”²²

The author uses the idea of drawing near to Christ several times throughout the book of Hebrews. He tells the reader to draw near to the throne of grace (Heb 4:16). He explains that believers could not draw near to Mt. Sinai under the penalty of death, but in Christ they can come near to Mt. Zion (Heb 12:18, 20, 22). Believers might draw near to

²¹ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 629.

²² Hagner, *Hebrews*, 163.

God for salvation through Christ (Heb 7:25).²³ The act of drawing near in Hebrews 10:22 seems to come along with the ordinance of baptism, “washed with pure water.” Schreiner explains that understanding this passage as spiritual cleansing (a reference to Ezekiel 36:25–26) does not preclude it from also referring to baptism, and the early reader of Hebrews would likely have envisioned baptism upon encountering this passage.²⁴

The second exhortation, to hold fast the confession of our hope, is a reiteration of the author’s earlier ideas of persevering in the faith (Heb 6:18). This concept also envisions the author’s later encouragement, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:1–2). The basis for these verses in chapter 12 is the author’s previous list of faithful men and women through redemptive history (Heb 11). He urges the reader to endure the way Moses, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Rahab, and other heroes of the faith endured. The context declares that any Christians who hold fast the confession of faith and endure to the end will receive the same reward as these heroes. The author explained, “apart from us they should not be made perfect” (Heb 11:40).²⁵ That fact is quite encouraging for today’s church and is a great motivator toward revitalization.

The author’s third exhortation, to spur one another on toward good works, pushes his audience in the exact direction toward which today’s churches are struggling, attendance. In no uncertain terms, the author explained exactly how the church encourages one another toward good works, by “not neglecting to meet together” (Heb 10:25). Church attendance has unfortunately declined in the last decade. Thom Rainer

²³ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 317-18.

²⁴ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 319.

²⁵ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 208.

noted that church members are not making attendance a priority like they used to.²⁶ Whereas three times a week was once considered regular attendance, that number has changed to three times a month.²⁷

These statistics along with the command from Hebrews to not neglect meeting together, raise the question, “How often should faithful church members attend church?” Garrett Kell makes a compelling case from this and other verses that church members should “make every effort to be present to worship and serve on more Sundays than not.”²⁸

These three exhortations help give basic guidelines of vital church membership. A revitalized church is composed of regenerate, baptized believers who steadfastly hold to the confession of Christ and meet regularly to encourage one another toward good works. The author provided a model of church health in which believers serve and disciple one another while looking to show the good works of Christ to the world. The author closes his exhortations by explaining why it is so important to draw near, hold fast, and consider how to stir one another toward good work—“the Day [is] drawing near” (Heb 10:25). This phrase was a reminder to Christians that Christ would indeed return one day. The faithfulness of the church matters not just in light of the present but in view of the second coming.²⁹

²⁶ Thom Rainer, “The Number 1 Reason for the Decline in Church Attendance,” Facts & Trends, December 17, 2018, <https://factsandtrends.net/2018/12/17/the-number-1-reason-for-the-decline-in-church-attendance/>.

²⁷ Thom Rainer, “Five Reasons Church Members Attend Church Less Frequently,” May 22, 2017, <https://thomrainer.com/2017/05/five-reasons-church-members-attend-church-less-frequently/>.

²⁸ Garrett Kell, “A Sample Statement on Regular Church Attendance,” 9 Marks, September 1, 2015, <https://www.9marks.org/article/a-sample-statement-on-regular-church-attendance/>.

²⁹ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 255-56.

The author moved from his exhortation into warning and then into the practical outworking of faith in Christ.³⁰ As a pastor, I am often asked, “What does God want me to do with my life?”, or “What is God’s will/purpose for me?” In other words, people are asking, “What kind of work do I do now that I am a Christian?” Hebrews has an answer for that question. From 10:32 to the end of the book, the author offers practical works that should be evident in the lives of believers.

Believers should endure for the sake of the faith (10:32–39). The Hebrew congregation was encouraged to remember the zeal they had for Christ when they were first “enlightened.” They gladly suffered alongside those who were being thrown in prison, knowing no earthly pain compared to their heavenly possessions. They were, therefore, encouraged to stay strong and hold fast in their faith, knowing that there is no place in heaven for those who would, as the prophet Habakkuk said, “shrink back” (Hab 2:3–4). The author of Hebrews expressed, as he had elsewhere in the book, his confidence in the congregation, that they “are not of those who shrink back,” but have the kind of faith that preserves their souls (10:39; 6:9). He would also later show that endurance is not simply a necessary characteristic of those who belong to Christ; it is also a blessed promise. Hebrews 12:3–4 provides the needed encouragement for endurance. The author urges his reader to consider Christ who endured such great hostility but did not grow weary. The author then reminds the reader that God has called them sons. Believers endure because they are children of God who showed them how to endure. This is great encouragement for a church that is seeking vitality. Revitalization is not an easy process and as things get difficult it is necessary that the church be reminded of this Christian characteristic of endurance, not just endurance for salvation but endurance for

³⁰ Heb 10:26-31 classifies as one of the warning passages of Hebrews and was handled in chap 2, “A Better Theology.”

continued sanctification.³¹ The author continues to speak of endurance and shows how it results from God's discipline (Heb 12:5–13).³²

Hebrews 12:14–17 begins a discussion that is continued in 13:1–3 about dealing with others in love. The Christian should “strive for peace with everyone,” helping all to “obtain the grace of God” (Heb 12:14–15). Chapter 13 begins by urging Christians to continue in brotherly love, to show hospitality to strangers, and to care for prisoners (Heb 13:1–3). The author continues by warning against sexual immorality and commanding the marriage bed to be held in honor and remain undefiled (13:4).

The author's next point, in 13:5, is that the Christian must seek contentment. The basis for Christian contentment is security in Christ. Jesus will never leave nor forsake his followers. They should therefore be content to have nothing else. The author quotes Psalm 118:6 “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me.” When a person is secure in Christ, the world cannot take anything of lasting value from him and he will be content to have Christ alone. The apostle Paul echoed these sentiments when he said, “I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound” (Phil 4:12). Certainly, “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Tim 6:6).

The author's next command is to “remember your leaders” and imitate their faith (Heb 13:7). He would mention leaders again in verses 17 and 24, though he may have had different leaders in mind.³³ Verse 7 seems to indicate past leaders whose final outcome was admirable in the faith. Apparently, these were godly leaders whose lives were worth imitating. The leaders mentioned in verses 17 and 24 were still living and should be obeyed joyfully.

³¹ John Piper describes endurance as the path from justification to glorification. In other words, the endurance of Hebrews is not just being held to the end but persevering obediently in the path to get there. Revitalization would fall along this path for some. John Piper, “The Fruit of Hope: Endurance,” *Desiring God*, July 27, 1986, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-fruit-of-hope-endurance>.

³² Hagner, *Hebrews*, 216.

³³ Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 418.

For each admonishment on Christian living given by the author of Hebrews, Christ is both the example and the means by which the reader might live faithfully.³⁴ Christ is the perfect picture of endurance and the means by which a person might find perfect endurance (Heb 12:2).

He despised shame and endured the cross all the way to the glorious and heavenly victory. Christ is the perfect picture of brotherly love in that he cared perfectly for others by offering up prayers and supplications (Heb 5:7), interceding for those who draw near (Heb 7:25), and sacrificing himself in place of sinful man (Heb 9:26). Christ is the perfect picture of marriage in that his relationship to the Father is undefiled.³⁵ He is the “radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb 1:3). In addition, he sat down (in purity) at the right hand of the Majesty on high after “making purification for sins.” He is undefiled and his undefiled relationship to the father is made available through him. Christ is the perfect picture of godly contentment in that he could never be drawn away for a more enticing offer, which is why his promise to never to leave or forsake his followers is sure (Heb 13:5). Christ is the perfect picture of respect and submission in that he willingly offered himself without blemish as a sacrifice to the Father (Heb 9:14). Because Christ acted on behalf of man, man is able to join in with the perfect work of Christ.

The author of Hebrews closes his the book by reiterating the great work of Christ in the world. He never changes, so his followers can trust him and his teaching above all else (Heb 13:8–9). His sacrifice took place outside the gate of Jerusalem. His life was not accepted by those who clung tightly to their misunderstanding of the Old

³⁴ Beale makes the connection that those who belong to Christ must live as Christ: “Such a priestly manner of living is appropriate for those who do not have a lasting city on this old earth.” G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 396.

³⁵ This is not overlooking the marriage relationship between Christ and the church but showing the pure and undefiled relationship that exists between the Father and the Son.

Covenant. “Therefore” those who wish to follow him must realize salvation lies outside the walls of the Old Covenant (Heb 13:12–13).³⁶

Only through Christ might man offer pleasing work to the Lord. Only through him might we “offer up a sacrifice of praise to God” and might we achieve a better work in this world (Heb 13:15–16).

Conclusion

Man’s work is not sufficient for salvation, and is not sufficient for enduring the trials of life. Christ’s work, however, is superior. It is the better work. The book of Hebrews is designed to point the reader toward this fact. No church revitalization exists separate from an overwhelming desire to be a part of Christ’s work in this world and in heaven to come. For those congregations that do truly desire Christ’s work, revitalization is an open door. The author of Hebrews showed that a church, and individuals that comprise a church, can run the race with endurance, can demonstrate true brotherly love, can uphold godly marriage, and can be content in this life. The secret to that kind of vitality is to draw near to Christ, hold fast the confession of faith, and consider how to stir up one another toward love and good works. Such is a church that is revitalized according to Christ, growing into spiritual maturity, and being made perfect for the glory of the Lord.

³⁶ Suffering outside the camp means also that those who follow Christ must be willing to “bear the stigma he bore.” We must be willing to be treated as outcasts for the sake of Christ. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 402.

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ABSTRACT

NEW LIFE, BETTER LIFE: DEVELOPING A MODEL FOR CHURCH REVITALIZATION FROM THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

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The aim of this project is to explore the author of Hebrews' approach to revitalization. The book of Hebrews demonstrates that church revitalization is not merely a matter of replacing an antiquated model for something more novel or vice-versa. Instead the author of Hebrews models an apostolic pattern of church revitalization—one committed to the priority of discipleship and theological training. The project is a series of six sermons designed to lead the congregation toward spiritual vitality by guiding hearers toward a Christ-centered philosophy of ministry. The first chapter addresses the topic of biblical theology and outlines the sermon series in Hebrews. The remaining six chapters use author-oriented exegesis and biblical theology to properly unpack and apply the passages in the modern context.

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