

Pulpit & People

**Essays in honour of William Still
on his 75th birthday**

edited by

Nigel M. de S. Cameron

Warden of Rutherford House, Edinburgh

and

Sinclair B. Ferguson

*Associate Professor of Systematic Theology,
Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia*

**RUTHERFORD HOUSE BOOKS
EDINBURGH**

*Published by Rutherford House,
Claremont Park, Edinburgh EH6 7PJ, Scotland*

ISBN 0 946068 18 6 cased

0 946068 19 4 limp

Copyright © 1986 Rutherford House and Contributors

This edition published 1986

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of Rutherford House.

Typeset by The Tweeddale Press Group, Berwick upon Tweed.
Printed by Martin's of Berwick.

THE PROBLEM OF APOSTASY IN HEBREWS

HENRY A. G. TAIT

It was in Gilcomston thirty five years ago that I came to know the Lord. Among my recollections of that time are the summer evenings of 1951, the sunlight streaming through the tall west gallery windows to fall on the figure in the pulpit, as, with all his heart and soul and body, he preached through the pages of Hebrews, for — and here is a word to all preachers and a particular word of comfort to those of us who are charged from time to time with being too demonstrative — it is what I saw that I remember now: the grim gesture described in the air of a nail being hammered into wood that made vivid and appalling the words of the writer, 'seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh and put him to an open shame'. It was unforgettable. And now I count it a privilege far beyond my capacities to have been invited to contribute something to this book of essays being presented to William Still. What you are about to read — if you read it — ill reflects the immense honour in which I hold the man to whom I owe in my own soul and life and ministry a debt incalculable.

But to my task. Consider the case of a man we shall call John Smith. He was converted as a young man. Perhaps, in order not to prejudice matters, we ought to say that he *professed* conversion as a young man. But no one doubted at the time that it was true. The evidence was there in his changed life. The Christ-light shone in his face. He loved God's word. He loved the fellowship of the Lord's people. He had zeal and joy. He showed gifts for prayer and ministry. In course of time he was persuaded that God was calling him to fuller service. To obey was going to be costly and difficult. But the cost was embraced, and one by one the difficulties were overcome, God apparently (one might say, surely) confirming the call with his enablings and provision. The church was encouraged and rejoiced. Then came temptation, singular in its severity. John fell. In a matter of a very short time, all had been abandoned, calling, faith, profession, fellowship, all, and in their stead came an open and blatant disavowal of Christ and God, a total desertion of the church, and a full-blooded return to the ways of the world, as if the spiritual experience had never been. John was an apostate. What is to become of such in this world and the next? That is the intense problem that lies behind this study of a well known crux in the New Testament.

Most evangelicals believe that, once a man has received Christ as his Saviour, he cannot lose him. If he has chosen Christ, it is because God has first chosen him, and drawn him (John 6:44). Those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son

... and those whom he predestined, he also called, and those whom he called, he also justified; and those whom he justified, he also glorified (Romans 8:29f). That is the chain of our salvation. Every link in it is wrought by God. It cannot break. Our assurance on the point is further confirmed by what Paul wrote to the Philippians, 'He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ' (Philippians 1:6). Jesus said of his sheep, 'No one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand'. (John 10:28f). We sometimes say, particularly with regard to the aged or sick of mind, 'Our hold on him may weaken and grow slack. His hold on us will be firm to the end'. Jesus said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life' (John 5:24). That sounds pretty conclusive. If eternal life is life without end, can it be received and then lost? Hardly; we have it forever. 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1).

So the Westminster Confession of Faith can say, 'They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved' (Confession 17:1).

This doctrine, however, appears to sit uncomfortably alongside certain passages in the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is a discomfort that was felt very early in church history. Following Tertullian, the Novatians and the Montanists used Hebrews as warrant for the perpetual exclusion from fellowship of those deemed to have apostatised by 'sinning wilfully' after conversion even though they sought to return. And in the heat of the consequent debate those who opposed and countered that position found themselves voicing doubts as to whether Hebrews should ever have been included in the canon of the Bible at all. Down to the present time Hebrews is the book to which principal appeal is made by those in the church who teach that a real Christian can fall away and lose his salvation. There seems to be a discrepancy on this point between the teaching of Hebrews and what we understand the rest of the New Testament to be saying. To some folk in the church of course this presents no problem. The writer to the Hebrews, they would argue, was a man of clay as were the other writers of the books of the Bible. They had their own opinions and we are free to choose which opinions we will receive and which set aside.

Evangelicals do not have nor desire this dubious liberty. We are persuaded that all Scripture is inspired by God, Old Testament and New, and each Testament in all its parts. Coming, then, from God's holy mind the scriptures cannot contradict one another. They harmonise, though we may not always, in the state of our knowledge at any one time, perceive precisely how they do so.

We reject the 'Clay Man' as a solution to the difficulty. But three other men offer themselves; the Straw Man, the Hollow Man, and the Man of Tarnished Metal.

There are five passages in Hebrews which together present the most serious warnings in the New Testament: Hebrews 2:1-3; 3:7-4. 13; 6:4-12; 10:19-39 and 12:1-17. Of these the third and the fourth are the ones which present the major difficulty. Here is the core of them:

It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account, and hold him up to contempt. For the land which has drunk the rain which often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed: its end is to be burned. (Hebrews 6:4-8).

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

The Straw Man interpretation is that the author is speaking only hypothetically. In other words the Writer is not talking about a situation that existed or indeed could exist. He is saying, 'If it were possible for the believer to fall away, these are the fearful things which would surely befall him. So since these things would be so if you were to give up the faith, see that you stand fast!' This is the approach commended by Hewitt in the Tyndale commentary (pp 110f). 'The theory', he says, 'has much in its favour and little against it. It in no way contradicts other passages of Scripture, neither is it in conflict with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.'

These are virtues indeed, if of a rather negative sort, and as a way out of the difficulty this solution may commend itself to many readers, particularly if they find the alternative solutions even less acceptable.

The Hollow Man may be described in terms of the figure who appears in our Lord's interpretation of the Parable of the Sower. He is the man who, on hearing the word, immediately received it with joy but having no root within himself — or not having, as we would say, 'the root of the matter in him' — when tribulation and persecution came on account of the word, immediately fell away. Is this the man the author of Hebrews is speaking of?

In Hebrews 6:4, the man described has 'been enlightened'. That could mean 'instructed or well informed in or about the faith'. He has 'tasted the heavenly gift'. It is possible that the reference is to the

Lord's Table, or it may refer to a more general experience of or acquaintance with the gospel. John Owen points out (in his massive *Commentary on Hebrews*) that you can taste a thing but fail to go on to swallow and digest it. You can reject something of which you have made even long trial.

Hebrews 6 adds that he has 'become a partaker of the Holy Ghost'. The reference could be to his baptism, or to the laying on of hands at admission to the fellowship, or it might be to various experiences he may have had of the operations of the Holy Spirit whether of a common or a miraculous sort (and not just as an observer). He might have been an active participant. After all did not our Lord say that some would come to him at the last and say, presumably truthfully, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' but that his response would be, 'I never knew you; depart from me you evildoers' (Matthew 7:22f). The unregenerate, it seems, could be 'partakers of the Holy Ghost'.

Further, the person in view in Hebrews 6 has 'tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come'. This may mean that he has heard and appreciated many sermons. He is not just a detached sermon taster, a connoisseur of the preacher's art; he has received impacts on his soul as he has listened to the truth about the Kingdom of God. He may know indeed that God himself has spoken to him personally. For all that, he may have declined to yield him his heart. Thus, inwardly and secretly, he remains unregenerate. Outwardly to the public eye, he is a Christian, for has professed Christ, associated with his people, adopted their ways, and lent his strength to the church. Consequently such a man has much to fall away from. When he defects, he brings Christ into public scorn. He has despised and rejected him, and crucified him afresh. Like that second field in the author's illustration, he took in much, of truth and good, but the fruit of faith has never really grown in his life at all. He *professed* Christ, but did not *possess* him. So not having the gift of eternal life he can fall away and die in his sins.

How does this 'Hollow Man' interpretation square with the man described in Hebrews 10? He 'received the knowledge of truth'; so surely did our man. He 'spurned the Son of God'. So did our man, for he made trial of Christ and then rejected him, tasted him and spat him out. He 'profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified'. Did our man do that? Was our man sanctified by the blood of the covenant? Can it be said that someone who professes Christ but does not possess him is sanctified by the blood? One might think not. On the other hand one might think that in that he was baptised in water outwardly and formally he was sanctified by the blood of the covenant. He was certainly seen to be so by man. He himself might even have thought he was at the time. John Brown in his *Commentary on Hebrews* appreciates this difficulty and suggests that what the words

mean is, he 'profaned the blood of the covenant by which *Christ* was sanctified', that is, to his High Priestly office, or, he suggests that we depersonalise the reference and take it simply to mean 'sanctifying blood' (pp 473f).

The man described in Chapter 10 is further said to have 'outraged the Spirit of grace'. Did our man do so? Certainly. If he made trial of the gospel over a period of instruction, tasting and involvement in the church's life, he was assuredly the subject of the Holy Spirit's urgent and repeated pleadings, yet he, after all that, said No, and surely the Spirit was outraged. So out from the church the man goes. He has rejected the one sacrifice that there is for sin. There is nought for him but the 'fury of fire' that is reserved for those who hate God.

Is it 'impossible' to restore the Hollow Man to repentance? Is there no hope that he could even yet come to a real experience of faith? Are those who have made thorough trial of the gospel and then rejected it to be written off entirely? After all, nothing is impossible with God, and that conviction remains at the bottom of our continued prayers for those who turn their backs on Christ. May there not be therefore the exceptional case of the apostate who does find his way back to God? The author may be speaking only of the general rule, and one can see something of how that general rule works. He who trampled the blood of Christ under his feet is psychologically most unlikely to turn to grace even if it continues to be proffered to him. He will think it is impossible that he should be forgiven. Or the rule may work like this: he who has tasted the heavenly gift only to spit it out, may have taken in just enough to be thereafter forever immunised against the good infection of Christ. How hardly therefore shall he enter the kingdom of heaven, if ever.

The Hollow Man solution to the problem of Hebrews 6 and 10, like the Straw Man solution, leaves the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints intact. It is the empty professor of the faith who falls away and suffers the fire of everlasting judgment.

However, we may feel that in order to make the Hollow Man fit the words of Hebrews we have had to exalt him, as it were, far above the ordinary run of folk in our churches today. Were we preachers to find in our people such response as this man made, such drinking in, such receiving with joy, such enlightenment, to say nothing of such participation in the Holy Spirit, would we not feel that something akin to revival had come? Indeed there may now be a fear about our hearts that if such a one as this man is to prove in the end to be a fraud, which of us will stand? This may be no bad fear. We are to take heed, those of us who think we stand, lest we fall (1 Cor. 10:12). But we may also feel that in order to make the words of Hebrews fit our man, we have put them under a strain and forced them out of their natural meaning to make them mean something less than they do.

What, then, of the Man of Tarnished Metal? The metal is silver: pure, solid, hallmarked, genuine. But long neglect has blackened it

beyond recognition. Yet silver it remains. So the Man of Tarnished Metal stands for the real Christian, the converted man, the man with the living Christ lodged in his heart. But he has so neglected the gift within him, so turned away from his God and Saviour and so resumed the ways of the world that none would know from their observation of him that he belonged to God at all. Even he himself may believe now that he no longer does. Is it of such a one that Hebrews is speaking?

This time, as we look at the verses we have been studying from Chapters 6 and 10, we find that the description fits easily. There need be no forcing of the words to mean other than what they mean naturally. He was once enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift in the deepest sense, was a partaker of the Holy Spirit, not just in experiencing the manifestations of the Spirit or knowing something of his ordinary operations. He has the Holy Spirit. He has tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come. He has been saved by the power of God, and, without a doubt, he has been sanctified by the blood of the covenant.

Now this man has committed apostasy. He has sinned deliberately. As the New English Bible puts it, he has 'persisted in sin'. It is not just a lapse, nor is it a prolonged bondage to a habit that he hated all the while; it is a determined and deliberate choosing to sin and keeping on at it wilfully. But could a real Christian so behave? G. H. Lang tells the story in his commentary on Hebrews of F. W. Newman, the brother of the man who became the Cardinal. He experienced a conversion to Christ. Some of the most discerning men among the leaders of the Christian Brethren, with whom Newman associated, were fully persuaded that it was genuine. After going on strongly for a time, he about-faced and then for forty years devoted all his considerable talents to doing everything in his power to deflect men and women from Christ. In the miracle grace of God, who can do the impossible, he found repentance at the very end of his life and caused it to be written over his grave that he had died trusting in the precious blood of Christ for salvation. A Christian can sin wilfully after he has received the knowledge of the truth.

What is such a man's fate? F. W. Newman appears to have found repentance, and, if he did, surely he found forgiveness, acceptance with God and in the end everlasting life. But, if we have understood Hebrews correctly, Newman is the exception. The rule is that the apostate will not find repentance but will die in his apostasy. What then is the fate of such a man? Is he lost?

Lang finds a key to understanding this problem in the story of the people of Israel to which the writer of the Epistle refers again and again. In Hebrews 3 allusion is made to the incident in Numbers 13 and 14 when the Israelites, having received the report of the spies about Canaan, refused through unbelief to go up and take the land. Hebrews comments, 'Take care brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God'

(Hebrews 3:12).

For their falling away the Israelites were thrust back into the wilderness and were never to enjoy the comfort and pleasure of the Promised Land. But they were not thrust back into Egypt, the land that speaks in the Old Testament of separation from God. Indeed, though more than once in their wanderings they longed for Egypt, to that place they were never suffered to return. In the wilderness they remained the objects, almost in spite of themselves, of divine solicitude and overarching care, however much at the same time they suffered under God's grave displeasure and judgment. 'In all their afflictions, he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them.' (Isaiah 63:9).

The application of that to the apostate Christian becomes clear. He is not lost. He cannot be. God has too much respect for the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified. He is God's child still, and God will not suffer him to be eternally separated from himself. But he will suffer him to live a wilderness life, a wasted life, a life cut off from so many of the blessings he should have enjoyed in Christ. He is not cursed. How can he be? The curse was borne for him once and for all by him Who became a curse for us (Galatians 3:13), but, like the barren field in the author's illustration, he is 'near to being cursed'. This may involve not only a wasted life, but a painful one and perhaps a short one as he suffers hurt and even premature death for his sins.

Scripture is not lacking in illustrations of this in Old Testament and in New. There were the two sons of Aaron in Leviticus 10; Korah and his associates in Numbers 16; Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5; the hapless persons in Corinth who profaned the Lord's Table and of whom Paul wrote 'That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died' (1 Corinthians 11:30); and finally, again in Corinth, the man who was to be 'delivered to Satan for the destruction of his flesh that his soul might be saved in the day of the Lord' (1 Corinthians 5:5). Is that the fate of the apostate Christian, to suffer, perhaps frightfully, in his body, while his soul in the end is saved? The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of erring Christians so, 'They whom God has accepted in his beloved . . . shall . . . certainly . . . be eternally saved. Nevertheless they may, through the temptation of Satan and of the world, the prevalence of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts; and have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves'. (Confession 17:3).

Does the matter end with temporal judgment? G. H. Lang thinks not. For one thing, he considers it would be a patent injustice if such a man as F. W. Newman, who lived comfortably and long and died peacefully in his bed, were, after half a lifetime's deliberate corrupting

of the souls of others, to step, by means of an eleventh hour repentance, which could undo little or none of the harm he had perpetrated, straight into the rewards of the blessed like the man who had never veered from the path of faithfulness at all.

Not all will want to echo Lang here. We might lack the courage; or we might lack the conviction, for remembrance of the dying thief in his last-hour conversion, or of the labourers who did receive equal rewards though their stints of service were so varied may make us uneasy with his line of thought.

Lang has a second point that may constrain us to give him more heed. He discovers in his careful and honest examination of the text a difficulty. The man who sinned against the law of Moses was condemned out of the mouths of two witnesses and then sentenced to death by stoning, a hideous way to die. Yet the author says, 'How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace?' Worse than stoning to death? What could be worse?

This leads him to look into the question of judgment for the unfaithful Christian not only in this life, but in the life to come. Of the final judgment that separates a soul forever from God and casts it into everlasting torment, the Christian can have no experience. He is altogether delivered from that by the atonement Christ made for his sins. But in a passage which is most naturally construed as referring to the people of God, Paul says, 'We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive good or evil, according to what he has done.' (2 Corinthians 5:10). Christians generally believe in reward hereafter for their faithfulness on earth. Should they not believe also in loss hereafter for their unfaithfulness on earth? Paul again, speaking this time of the service of the Christian, faithfully done, or neglected, says, 'Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble — each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test which sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as by fire.' (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

Here then, beyond this life, is a fire that will burn away the long-accumulated dross of an apostate's life. The thorns and the thistles of his field are painfully to be purged away, leaving it perhaps happily yet to bear a fairer crop of service in heaven in the end. But whether that be the case or no, for the wretched years of apostasy, he suffers loss, but, through the very Christ whom he denied, but who will not deny him, he will be saved. God will not let him go. He will judge him and it will be a fearful thing for him to fall so into the hands of the living God. But he will be saved.

That then is the Man of Tarnished Metal solution to the problem of apostasy in Hebrews. Better than any other, we may feel, it lets the words of the passages in question mean what they appear to say, and, at the same time accords with the doctrine of the Scriptures as a whole.

May it also be pastorally more satisfactory? We turn back to John Smith. If, in the grace of God, we were to have opportunity to help him back to Christ, which would we prefer to say: 'John, your conversion was not real. You never really received Christ these years ago, but come, receive him now by faith', or 'John, you received Christ as your Saviour these years ago. He has never left you. He is there in your heart now, patiently waiting for the day when you will yield your life to him anew. Let him up from that cellar where you have imprisoned him so long'? I think I would prefer to be able to say the second. The first might carry the risk that John would feel his 'second conversion' was no more authentic than his first is now said to have been. The second honours those early dealings of God with his soul as true and real, and affirms the faithfulness and unspeakable grace of God.

It may be that when we have examined and tested the various solutions, none of them totally satisfies. When in our study of the Scriptures we encounter a persistent difficulty or dissatisfaction, the possibility has to be considered whether we may not be asking the wrong question. We are saying to the author of the Epistle, 'Tell us, what is the eternal fate of the apostate? Assure us that in the end all is well with him. Give us this comfort.' Perhaps the author gives us the answer. But it may be that he yields it to us with difficulty because it is not the thing that he is primarily concerned to say. His concern is not with the apostate. After all, he says it is 'impossible' to do anything with him! His concern is with the man who has not yet fallen but is in terrible danger of doing so. He is not going to say to him, 'Everything will be all right in the end for the apostate, whatever fires may befall him in the interim in time and eternity'. He is urgently, winsomely and with all his heart going to point him to Christ, and to the strength and comfort that are there in the Great High Priest to enable the hard-pressed believer to lift up his drooping hands, strengthen his weak knees, and persevere to the end.