

ONCE SAVED, ALWAYS SAVED?

An Exegetical Study on the Epistle to the Hebrews 6:1-12

A Paper Presented

to

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by

Gang Wang

GRACE TRINITY COMMUNITY CHURCH

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An Exegetical Study on the Epistle of the Hebrews 6:1-12

1. Introduction

1) A Controversy that Splits the Church

In May 2006, I went to Hong Kong and translated for a lecturer as he taught a group of pastors of different House Churches from the Mainland China. The course been taught is Systematic Overview. In dealing with Soteriology, there was a dramatic clash in the class; it is around the five points of Calvinism. A particular House Church group strongly opposed the fundamental doctrines of Calvinism. The leader of this group even came up to the front and argued against the five points one by one while the other groups in the class tried to defend them. Within that hot debate the doctrine of predestination and the question of “once saved always saved” became the foci, only from then I started to realize the weight of such an issue. Hebrew 6:4-6 was used as one of the major texts by those who argued against Calvinism.

Since 2006 we have learned from different sources about “once saved always saved” controversy among the Chinese churches. One of the major split due to this controversy happened from about the middle of 1980s to 1990s among the Wenzhou House Churches. Arminianism and Hyper-Calvinism (including Calvinism) sharply divided from each other because of this debate on “once saved always saved”. Even now there are still many problems among the Chinese churches over this controversy.

There seems to be an upsurge of Reformed Theology among the churches in China in this recent ten years. The opposition to the Reformed Theology comes not only from Arminianism, but also from some other conservative churches¹. Certain weaknesses and negative influence of the Hyper-Calvinism are also in view among many Chinese churches. As we build the church of Christ with the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), such an unavioded and serious controversy needs to be positively addressed.

2) “Once Saved, Always Saved?”

The question: is it possible for a Christian believer to lose his or her salvation? Different answers to this question divide people into different camps.

Traditional Calvinism affirms the security of believer’s salvation with the doctrine of “Perseverance of the Saints”: “a Calvinist teaching that asserts that once persons are truly ‘born of God’, or ‘regenerated’ nothing in heaven or earth ‘shall be able to separate (them) from the love of God’ (Rom. 8:39)”². The Westminster Confession of Faith has defined Perseverance as: “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.”³

Arminianism believes the possibility of a decisive loosing of one’s salvation based on a list of ‘tough’ texts from the Bible such as: Hebrews 6:4-6 & 10:26-27. The main argument is that the eternal security will give people a licence to sin without fear of God’s judgment. This

¹ Ying Wang, *Letter of Peace 2013*, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_6aa2580f01019edm.html (accessed August 9, 2013).

² *Perseverance of the Saints*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perseverance_of_the_saints (accessed August 15, 2013).

³ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (chap. 17, sec. 1). <http://www.reformed.org/> (accessed August 15, 2013).

view emphasizes the faithfulness of the believer onto salvation. For Arminianism, salvation is not conditioned upon God's grace, but conditioned upon believer's faithfulness. Thus a believer can give up his faith and consequently lose his salvation.

Free Grace Doctrines (non-traditional Calvinist), as a third view on this controversy, is espoused by Charles Stanley, Norman Geisler, Zane C. Hodges, Bill Bright, and others⁴. It emphasizes that the salvation is totally in the hand of God and doesn't depend on any human deed. Charles Stanley claims, "Even if a believer for all practical purposes becomes an unbeliever, his salvation is not in jeopardy... believers who lose or abandon their faith will retain their salvation."⁵

In comparison the above three views, Wikipedia summarizes⁶ in this way:

"Traditional Calvinists do not dispute that salvation requires faithfulness, and the point of difference between these Calvinists and Arminians is over whether God allows true Christians to fall away. Free Grace advocates agree with traditional Calvinists that salvation cannot be lost but with the Arminians that true Christians can backslide or fall away. However, the Free Grace advocates and the Arminians do not define repudiation in the same way: the former sees backslidden believers as merely "carnal", hindering their sanctification process, whereas the latter sees them as having fallen from the saving grace they once possessed."

3) Contents & Methodology of this Study

Based on the above concern toward the "once saved, always saved" controversy, this paper will be developed into two parts:

- Firstly, to explore what this key text (Heb. 6:1-12) really says through a careful in depth exegesis. The exegesis will be divided into five parts which are five complete sentences in Greek: 1-3; 4-6; 7-8; 9-10; 11-12. The exegesis will also be based on Greek diagrams of these five sentences which will clearly show the linguistic structure of the text.
- Secondly, to discuss the relevance of this key text to the "once saved always saved" controversy based on the result of the exegesis.

As the Reformed principle of 'Five Solas' is highly regarded, the exegesis of this text will be as loyal to the Scripture as it is possible, but at the same time, it will also be application oriented in order to balance learning God's Word and doing God's Word. To truly implement the Christ centered methodology, the banner of the Cross should be highly lifted up, that the Holy Spirit may inspire and God the Father shall be glorified.

⁴ *Perseverance of the Saints*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/> (accessed August 15, 2013).

⁵ Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville: Oliver Nelson, 1990), 1-5.

⁶ Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?*

2. Backgrounds of the Epistle to the Hebrews

Although the human author of this epistle is notably debated and uncertain, as well as the date and location of its writing, the purpose of writing and the challenges the original readers faced can be quite accurately determined especially from the Epistle's internal evidences. This background study will set the tone for understanding of this key difficult text.

1) Challenges that the Early Church Faced

Generally speaking, the challenges that the early church faced was two-fold:

- Heresies: to confuse the teaching of the newly established church
- Persecutions: to frighten and torment the followers of Christ

Heresies

The two major heresies among the early churches were Judaism and Gnosticism. Battling against Judaism was one of the main tasks for Apostle Paul, especially over the issue of circumcision. Within the Epistle to the Hebrews the author invincibly proved the superiority of Christ to Judaism through a comprehensive comparison between Christ and the Old Testament priests, prophets, Mosaic Law, sacrificial system, Old Covenant, etc. Behind the scene, Satan must have bombarded the goodies of Judaism in order to persuade the new believers to go back to Judaism. At the same time Satan also brought the pagan philosophies and religions to confuse the early Christians who might be easily misled to certainly mysterious "secret knowledge"⁷ which was outside of Christ. This attack would most likely be applied to the gentile believers, many of whom might have that cultural background which Apostle Paul clearly saw: "*Greeks look for wisdom*" (1 Cor. 1:22). By teaching certain secret knowledge Gnosticism plotted to turn the believer's eyes away from Christ. So both Judaism and Gnosticism were competing against Christ, the cornerstone of the Church, from inside and outside. The readers of this epistle and many other early believers were tempted to feel foolish of the cross of Christ, which is truly the power of God unto those who are being saved (1 Cor. 1:18)! For this reason, the author had highly exalted Christ in this epistle from the very beginning to the end.

Persecutions

The brutal persecutions among the early churches were from two sides. Firstly, the Jews could not tolerate the popularity of Jesus. As the Lord foretold His disciples, these followers would not be treated better than their Master (Mt. 10:24-25). The jealousy drove the Jews to madly persecute the early Christians. Beside jealousy it was a religious fanaticism. Many fervent Jews would be like Saul of the Tarsus regarding their persecution toward Christians as a fervent zeal to their God (Acts 23:12). In their eyes, Christianity would be the most terrible heresy against God (Acts 21:28). Secondly, the persecution also came from the Gentiles, especially from the Romans. Most commentators agree that the date of this epistle is before A.D. 70 when the temple was destroyed. It seems that the most severe Roman persecutions had not yet started (Heb. 12:4) at the time of writing this epistle, but from Timothy's imprisonment (Heb. 13:23) as well as others' (Heb.13:3) it is sure that the persecutions also came from the Gentiles. Knowing believers' constant struggles with

⁷ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (London: The Banner of the Truth Trust, 1978), 45-50.

persecutions, the author throughout the whole epistle encouraged his readers to persevere (Heb. 6:12; 10:36) as the Author of their faith had endured the suffering of the cross.

2) Situation of the Original Readers

Though the church of Christ will never be overcome by the evil one (Mt. 16:18), the church here on earth is not bullet-proofed. Attacking with heresies and persecutions Satan cunningly tempted to turn the eyes of the believers from Christ to either Judaism or their own miseries. Only if this Rock of the Ages would be shaken, the church would fall. Upon such intensive attacking, people in the church had different responses. There were those faithful ones who by the power of the Holy Spirit “*stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire*” (Heb. 11:33b-34a). But there were also weak ones who either temporarily backslid or permanently turned away from Christ⁸. Concerning backsliding and apostasy, the two clear examples in the Bible are Peter and Judas. Peter temporarily denied the Lord three times because of a great fear while Judas permanently betrayed the Bread of Life for thirty pieces of silver. In the church of the original readers there must be both backslidden believers and apostates as confusing heresies and brutal persecutions came upon the Bride of the Lamb wave after wave.

3) Primary Purpose of this Epistle

According to the pressing situation that the original readers faced, the primary purpose of the author writing this epistle is: to warn and to encourage the believers who were withstanding the enticement of Judaism and tyrannical persecutions that they might not become fainted in heart but press on to inherit God’s promise with faith and patience (Heb. 6:12). The two interwoven themes, warning and encouraging, are repeated seven times throughout the whole epistle:

Warning (Heb. 2:1-4)	↔	Encouraging (Heb. 3:6)
Warning (Heb. 3:7)	↔	Encouraging (Heb. 3:14)
Warning (Heb. 4:11)	↔	Encouraging (Heb. 4:14-16)
Warning (Heb. 6:4-6)	↔	Encouraging (Heb. 6:9, 19-20)
Warning (Heb. 10:19-24)	↔	Encouraging (Heb. 10:25)
Warning (Heb. 10:26-31)	↔	Encouraging (Heb. 10:39)
Warning (Heb. 12:15, 25)	↔	Encouraging (Heb. 12:1-3)

Though warning and encouraging appear to be opposite to each other in some sense, the two main themes here in this epistle actually are one exhortation. What the author intended to say to his readers is: “Don’t step back! That’s hopeless and helpless. Go forward! It is completely hopeful and glorious.” Belief and endurance are the two inseparable sides of the genuine faith that every pilgrim of the Heaven truly has. Praise God! The Cross of Christ is all about such a living faith: full assurance toward things unseen (Heb. 11:1).

⁸ Apostasy. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostasy> (accessed September 3, 2013).

3. Exegetical Analysis

1) Direct Context of the Text

Different commentators outline the Epistle to the Hebrews in different ways; here the writer of this paper divides the whole epistle into three major parts:

- **Part I** (chapters 1-4): Superiority of Christ as the Great Prophets
- **Part II** (chapters 5-10): Superiority of Christ as the Great High Priest
- **Part III** (chapters 11-13): Superiority of Christ as the Great King of Faith

Part II of this epistle (chapters 5-10) is totally developed to compare Christ with the Old Testament sacrificial system. Through such a comparison the author actually interpreted the Old Testament in a true Biblical way, which is quintessentially Christ-Centric. The first session (chapters 5-7) of this part is about the priesthood of Christ, Who is the great High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek which is much greater than Aaronic priesthood. But as the author was about to expound on this topic by the end of chapter 5, he suddenly stopped at verses 5:11-14, and add a whole chapter 6 to talk about something else, then only until chapter 7 he returned and continually explained the order of Melchizedek. The reason of such an insertion is very important for us to understand our text (6:1-12) since that is its direct context.

Verses 5:11-14

“About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”

“It is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.”

The truth of God is indeed profound, but there are always ways to proclaim and explain. However, if men determine to close their ears and oppress the truth, then whatever the author could speak would be meaningless. Apostle Paul was very blunt: *“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”* (2 Cor. 4:3-4). We should thank God for the Epistle to the Hebrews in which the author boldly interpreted the Old Testament in a Christ-Centric way. It’s hard to imagine if this Epistle was not in the Canon today how people would understand Melchizedek, the temple, the sacrifices, and the covenants. If Melchizedek was not clearly and authoritatively regarded as a type of Christ here in this Epistle, interpreting Melchizedek as a type of Christ would most likely be criticized as a very dangerous allegory and totally rejected by many people today. It might be true even in the author’s time. That’s why he said “it is hard to explain”. The reason is not that the author lacked of ability to explain. The reason that the author had to stop and insert a whole chapter (chapter 6) is the immaturity of his original readers: they were supposed to eat bread by then but still have to drink milk (Heb. 5:12). That will be the Fallen Condition Focus⁹ and the main problem that

⁹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

the author would deal with in chapter 6. It will also be the key to understand our text (Heb. 6:1-12).

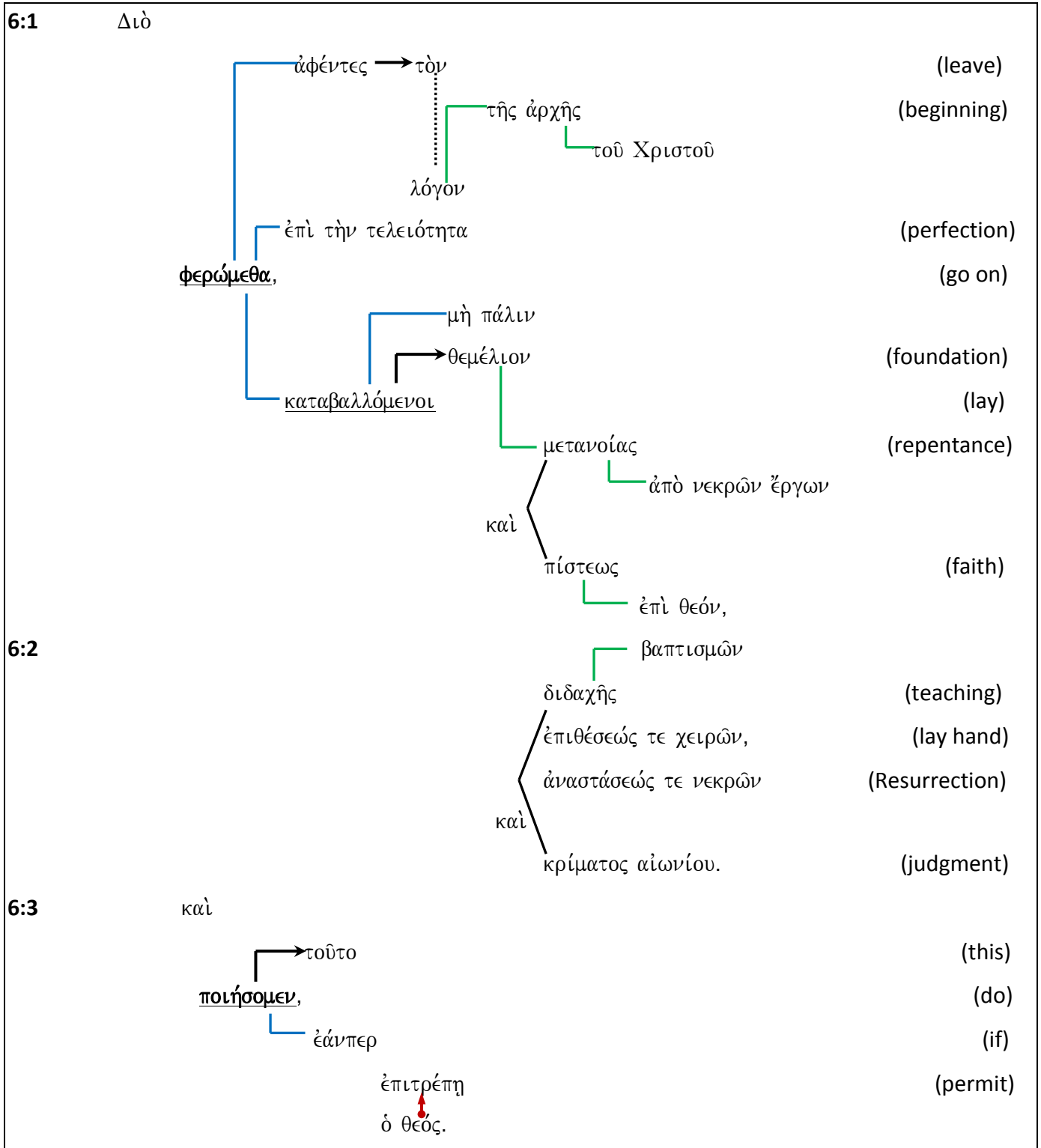
2) Verses 6:1-3

“Therefore 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 judgment. And this we will do if God permits.”

“Therefore” (Διὸ)

This conjunctive word Διὸ (therefore) carries a rational force from the previous paragraph (Heb. 5:11-14) into an exhortation of action “let us...” Its reason in the previous paragraph for this exhortation is the inability to discern good from evil (Heb. 5:14) because of the spiritual immaturity. The practical result of such an inability might well be that many believers could not distinguish between the One “*Who for a little while was made lower than the angels*” (Heb. 2:9) and those great prophets (messengers, angels) in the Old Testament time. So the purpose of the action that Διὸ (therefore) leads would be to become mature and able to distinguish good from evil, greater from lesser, reality from shadow, permanent from temporary.

Greek Diagramming I (Heb. 6:1-3)



“Let us leave the elementary doctrine”

The phrase *“the elementary doctrine of Christ”* echoes *“the basic principles of the oracles of God”* in the previous paragraph (Heb. 5:12), and also relates to *“a foundation”* in 6:1b-2:

“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 judgment.” Though our justification by faith is an instant event, the process of sanctification is lasting. We may not be able to measure spiritual growth with any human measurement, but this doesn't mean that there is no difference between any believers in spiritual growth. If there is “elementary doctrine” or “basic principles”, there must also be “advanced principle” and “profound doctrines”, and that is what the author expected in verses 1-2: perfection or maturity.

Notice ἀφέντες (leave) here is a participle modifying the main verb φερώμεθα (go on), and it shows the manner of “go on to maturity” which is to leave the elementary doctrines. This is just like a young man growing up by leaving his home and parents so that he may become mature and independent. Ellingworth¹⁰ suggests that this word may also carry a negative sense, such as “and not keep repeating” or “and not just stay where we are”. A practical problem with many Christians is satisfaction with their own spiritual life and stopping growing.

“Go on to maturity”

The word ‘maturity’ (τελειότητα) also means ‘perfection, completeness’. Though it's hard to accurately define the spiritual maturity, we may still have a descriptive idea about it, such as “...*the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil*” (Heb. 5:14b). Christian maturity is the author's major concern; it is not only in this part but also in the whole epistle. The maturity or perfection here doesn't mean a believer like a student will at certain point graduate and has no more necessity to learn. Apostle Paul testified:

“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.” (Phil. 3:12-15).

As the main verb of this sentence, ‘Go on’ (φερώμεθα) is subjunctive present passive. Ellingworth believes it is not a request for permission but an appeal for action¹¹. But the interesting thing is that this subjunctive verb is in passive mood; literally translate as ‘let us be carried on’, which implies the growth of a believer is primarily God's work: “*it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Phil. 3:13)

“Not laying again a foundation”

‘Not again’ echoes ‘leaving’ in the same sentence. The participle καταβαλλόμενοι (laying) also modifies the main verb as ‘leaving’ does to reinforce the necessity of ‘go on to maturity’. Foundation has already been laid; it's time now to build up a fruitful Christian life. If the builder keeps laying foundations, the building will never be finished nor used. The foundation is important and without it the building won't stand long, but the foundation is still not the whole building.

¹⁰ Paul Ellingworth and Eugene A. Nida. *A Translator's Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews* (London, New York, Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 1983), 108-109.

¹¹ Ellingworth and Nida. *A Translator's Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews*, 108.

The elementary doctrines are the foundations of faith. The author then listed the typical areas of these elementary doctrines. They are about six items within three groups¹²:

- repentance from dead works & faith toward God: refers to the past
- baptism & the laying on of hands: refers to the present
- the resurrection of the dead & the eternal judgment: refers to the future

From 'elementary doctrine' to 'a foundation', and to 'instruction/teaching', this list of six items is about the basics of Christian faith that a baptismal class normally teaches today. The problem is even today many new believers will stop growing in the knowledge and grace of the Lord Jesus after they get baptized. This elementary doctrinal knowledge is basic and foundational. But baptism is not graduation; baptism indicates a new birth, new beginning. Nobody should stop growing after he is born.

"This we will do if God permits"

The question here is what 'permit' means. Ellingworth believes that the best rendering of this clause should be "if this is what God wants"¹³. This points to God's will. Another question is what the pronoun 'this' refers to. It could refer to that list of elementary doctrines, or lay a foundation again since that is the direct and nearest context. But Morris seems to catch the real sense of this pronoun:

"The writer rounds off this section of his argument with the declaration that they will go on to maturity 'God permitting.' He does not overlook the fact that God is in control."¹⁴

One reason for this is that the main verb of the first sentence (6:1-2) is 'go on to maturity'. The second reason is the passive mood of this main verb, which shows the spiritual growth is not independent. It is not simply our own responsibility or ability to grow, "but God gave the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6). It's so easy to encourage others to grow and to do good works but forget only God can give growth.

3) Verses 6:4-6

"For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt."

"For": a sharp turning from the previous section

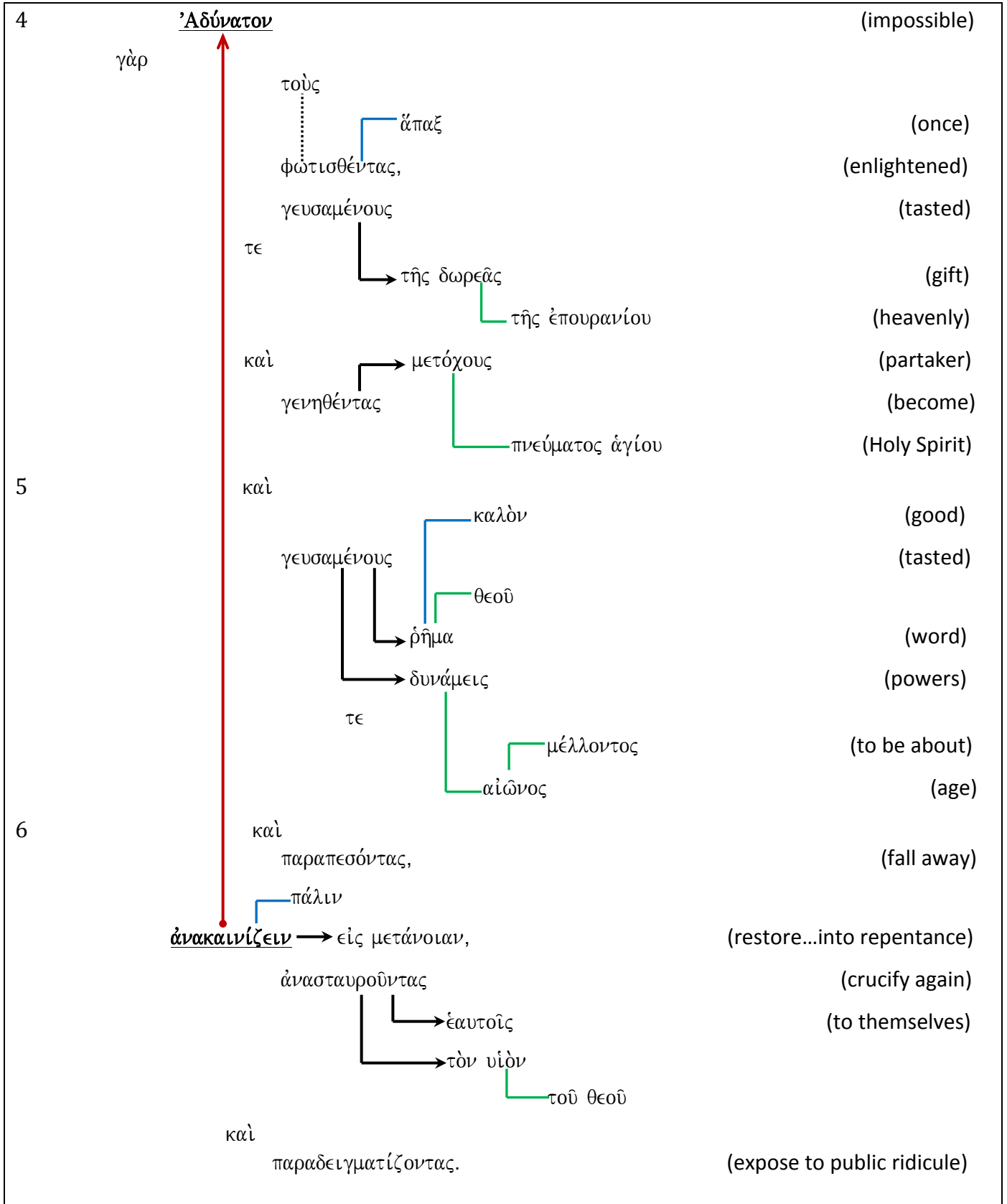
It seems the author turned suddenly here from the first three verses to something else, but notice the conjunction γὰρ (for) here, it introduces a reason to the first three verses of this chapter. The main point of verses 4-6 provides a reason for the main verb of verses 1-3. It is not the reason that "we will do", but the reason that "let us go on to maturity". The question behind verses 4-6 is: if believers have been justified by faith, why should they have to press on to perfection?

¹² Ellingworth and Nida. *A Transalator's Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews*, 110.

¹³ Ellingworth and Nida, *A Transalator's Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews*, 112.

¹⁴ Leon Morris, *Bible Study Commentary: Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 58.

Greek Diagramming II (Heb. 6:4-6)



“Impossible” (Ἀδύνατον)

This is an ordinary adjective. As most infinitive clauses this is to highlight the weight of this word in the whole sentence. Even in English we can say “to restore them again to repentance is impossible”, but then the emphasis would be on “to restore”. So the focal point of the whole sentence (verses 4-6 are one sentence) is this word ‘impossible’, and it has a very strong sense here as Ellingworth noted that it’s impossible for both man and God¹⁵. It is because of this impossibility believers should “*go on to maturity*”. Such a serious impossibility casts a force of encouragement to press on. But be careful, this is NOT to say: “if believers don’t go on to maturity, it is impossible for them to keep their salvation”. Remember the verb “go on” in verse 1 is in passive mood, literally means “let us be carried on to perfection”. The growth of our spiritual life is God’s work. Also in verse 3, the author reminds us “*if God permits*”, that is the condition of “*we will do*” and “*go on to maturity*”. Then we need to explore three questions further: What is impossible? To whom is it impossible? Why is it impossible?

“Restore again to repentance”

This is the answer to the first question “what is impossible”; to restore certain kind of people again to repentance is impossible. In order to deny God’s existence, secular philosophers often ask: “is there anything impossible for God?” we may also remember God Himself said “*Is anything too hard for the LORD?*” (Gen. 18:14; cf. Jer.32:27) Is God’s grace not sufficient for certain kind of sinner? The Lord Jesus said, “*Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.*”(Mt. 12:31). It seems that “to restore again (certain kind of people) to repentance” is like to forgive those who “blasphemy against the Spirit”. For some reason it is impossible. The so called “unpardonable sin” in Matthew 12 is in the context of those Pharisees who blasphemed against Jesus saying “*It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.*”(Mt. 12:24) Indeed Jesus casted out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit. The perverted blasphemy is to make the (most) Holy Spirit equal to the most evil spirit. The unpardonable nature of such a sin is based on the impossibility of equating the Holy Spirit to the most evil spirit. It is not that God is unable to save such people, but rather that such people reject the Holy Spirit and God gives them up (Rom. 1:24). It is impossible to deny the name of Jesus Christ and at the same time to be saved. To fully understand why it is impossible we must also answer the question “to whom it is impossible”.

The prefix ‘re-’ in ‘restore’ carries the same force as the adverb ‘again’, means to put something back to its original position. The preposition εἰς (into) shows the location or position of this restoration. The word ‘repentance’ is a key word in Soteriology, means “to turn away from sin to the righteousness of Jesus Christ”. It has the sense of a U-Turn, 180 degree of turning. So the author is saying it is impossible to put certain kind of people back into a ‘repenting’ (or a U-Turn) position. It is impossible simply because it would be self-contradict just as to blaspheme the Holy Spirit as evil.

“Those who.....”

The object of ‘restoring’ is defined by a series of five participles, which can be divided into two parts: the first four participles (“have been enlightened”, “have tasted”, “have

¹⁵ Ellingworth and Nida, *A Transaltor's Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews*, 113-114.

shared”, “have tasted”) describe a positive status while the last participle (“have fallen away”) describes a negative status. And these five participles are all aorist tense pointing to some action already executed. Between these two parts there is a conjunction: καὶ¹⁶ (and) in the beginning of verse 6. Many English versions¹⁷ and Chinese versions¹⁸ render it as a conditional conjunction: ‘if’; as a result common impression to this whole sentence (verses 4-6) will be “if such kind of people fall away, it is impossible to restore them”. Though the idea is there, the emphasis of the whole sentence would be turned to the conditional clause, which naturally draws people’s attention to a possibility of falling away. And such a possibility of falling away will accordingly become a form of warning. However the Greek conjunction καὶ (and) should be simply translated as ‘and’¹⁹ as Today’s English Version correctly renders this clause as “*and then they abandoned their faith*”. When we take καὶ as its normal meaning ‘and’, then the adjectival participle after it will become a parallel with the four participles before this καὶ, then the meaning of the two parts shows a sharp comparison. So the five participles together define the demonstrative pronoun ‘those’, which are the objects to whom “it is impossible”. The emphasis of the whole sentence is not the condition (if) of a possibility²⁰ but rather the seriousness of that impossibility of restoration.

To illustrate this idea we can use a picture of the train. What the author spoke of is the seriousness of the impossibility to put a fallen train (it ran well in the past but now it is off the track) back to its track. Comparing to this, it is different to say “if a well running train falls off its track, it is impossible to put it back”. The crucial difference between these two pictures lies in the nature of the subject: one is an already fallen train; the other is any train in a general sense. One is actual seriousness; the other is possible danger.

Though these two nuances are hardly distinguished, the conditional conjunction ‘if’ plus the complexity of the whole sentence can easily draw people’s attention to the possibility of falling away. All the translations with the word ‘if’ will translate παραπεσόντας (have fallen away) in a present tense pointing to a future possibility, but actually this participle is aorist that is an actual event already happened in the past. People can still argue that even we render the clause as “those who have once been enlightened, have tasted the heaven gift, have shared the Holy Spirit, have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the power of the age to come, AND have fallen away”, it still shows the possibility of those who “have once enlightened ...” may fall away. That’s perfectly true, but it’s not what the author says here in this sentence. According to this sentence, the author does acknowledge the existence of such people who have these two features: they were once enlightened, and they have fallen away. But we still need to ask what kind of people are those who “*have once been enlightened, have tasted the heaven gift, have shared the Holy Spirit, have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the power of the age to come*”. Are they truly saved believers? It would be easier and much clearer if the author says: “it is impossible to restore those fallen believers” or “if the born again believers fall²¹ away, it is impossible to restore them”.

¹⁶ This is a most common Greek word; it means ‘and’ expressing a simple parallel.

¹⁷ The text quoted in this paper is from ESV (2001), but the recent versions of ESV (2007, 2011) have modified verse 6:6 as “**and then** have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance.....”

¹⁸ Most likely also in many other languages.

¹⁹ Daniel Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 276.

²⁰ John Wesley said in his commentary on this verse, “Here is not a supposition, but a plain relation of fact.”

²¹ It will hardly be the past tense in saying this.

Description of such a people

One commentator²² noticed a correspondence of the list of this description to the list of description in verses 2b-3:

A foundation /Elementary doctrine (Verses 2-3)	Those for whom restoration is impossible (Verses 4-6)
Repentance from dead works	Have once been enlightened
Faith toward God	Have tasted the heavenly gift
Instruction about washings, the laying on of hands	Have shared in the Holy Spirit
The resurrection of the dead	Have tasted the goodness of the word of God
Eternal judgment	and the powers of the age to come

Though this comparison may not be perfectly appropriate, we can still see the fact that “those for whom restoration is impossible” have learned certain elementary doctrines of Christ according to the description of the four participles (Heb. 6:4-5). This fact is also showed in chapter 10 verse 26 “*after receiving the knowledge of the truth*”. The author clearly rebuked the spiritual laziness in the previous paragraph (Heb. 5:11-14) in order to encourage his readers to press on (Heb. 6:1) and continually grow in their spiritual life. So the true comparison is between the readers of this epistle whom the author called “*beloved*” (Heb. 6:9) and “those for whom restoration is impossible” (Heb. 6:4-6). The main similarity of both groups is that they both have a beginning of “*the knowledge of the truth*” or “*the basic principles of the oracles of God*” (Heb. 5:12; cf. 6:1).

The first four participles in verses 4-5 actually have three verbs: ‘to be enlightened’, ‘to taste’, and, ‘to share’ (to become sharer). They all have that sense of partly but not fully reaching to their objects²³: to be enlightened but not fully illuminated; to taste but not fully eat; to share but not fully own. The aorist tense of these participles show an ‘already’ happened action, but the meaning of these verbs shows a ‘not yet’ fully finished object. This reminds us the theme in chapters 3 and 4: an “already but not yet” Sabbath rest. In those two chapters the author of the epistle refers to the Israelites in the wilderness as an example of unbelief. Though they had been brought out of the bondage, though they had been baptized by Moses in the sea (1 Cor. 10:2), though they had tasted the spiritual food and drunk the spiritual water, though they had received the law and been enlightened by the word of God, though they had shared the overshadowing of God’s Spirit as the Glory of God filled the tabernacle, though they witnessed by their own eyes the power of God in ten miracles, they fallen away. The author clearly gave the fundamental reason that they could not enter into the Promised Land: “*So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.*” (Heb. 3:19) In chapter 4 the author continually encourage his readers: “*Let us therefore strive to enter that rest*” (4:11a), the purpose is: “*so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience*” (4:11b). Though the word ‘unbelief’ (ἀπιστία) in verse 3:19 and the word ‘disobedience’

²² A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, <http://www.pbministries.org/books/pink/Hebrews/> (accessed Sept. 15, 2013).

²³ Walter Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979).

(ἀπειθεία) in verse 4:11 are different, but they refer to the same concept: faith (πίστις). Though God made a covenant²⁴ with them at Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:4-8), God didn't regard the rebellious Israelites as faithful:

“Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You shall take up Sikkuth your king, and Kiyyun your star-god- your images that you made for yourselves, and I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,’ says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts.” (Amos 5:25-27)

If there is ever any real instance of the people described in those three verses (Heb. 6:4-6), it should be the old Israel: *“And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?”* (Heb. 3:17) They typically had those two features: firstly, they had once been enlightened, and secondly they had fallen away. But when the author of this epistle said *“they were unable to enter because of unbelief”* (Heb. 3:19), we have to acknowledge that “to be enlightened, to taste, to share” and ‘belief’²⁵ are two things totally different. If having *“the basic principles of the oracles of God”* (Heb. 5:12) or *“the elementary doctrine of Christ”* (Heb.6:1) or even *“the knowledge of the truth”* (Heb. 10:26) equal to ‘belief’ which in Greek is the word ‘faith’, then the author could not say *“they were unable to enter because of unbelief”* (Heb. 3:19). The word ‘unbelief’ here means ‘having no faith’. Therefore the people described in chapter 6 verses 4-6 are those who are like the old Israel having been enlightened by the truth, having tasted the gift of God from Heaven, having shared with the Holy Spirit, but have no faith, and because of such unbelief they eventually fell away.

But is ‘belief’ or ‘faith’ exactly equal to ‘faithfulness’? If the answer is ‘yes’, then *“they were unable to enter because of unbelief”* (Heb. 3:19) would also be rendered as “they were unable to enter because of unfaithfulness”. Believers’ faithfulness emphasize the human efforts to be loyal to God while faith cannot simply mean human effort or work; faith is something between God and man, and it has a strong sense opposite to work. When Apostle Paul expounded the doctrine of justification by faith in Romans chapter 4, he quoted Psalm 32 and said: *“David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works”* (Rom. 4:6). Paul made it very clear that faith is essentially different than work, though we acknowledge the importance of work in revealing a true faith (James 2:14-26). If ‘faith’ and ‘faithfulness’ are exactly same, then justification by faith would mean justification by ‘faithfulness’. So we can’t render chapter 3 verse 19 as “they were unable to enter because of unfaithfulness”. The reason of falling away is not just the outward unfaithfulness, but rather the inner unbelief. Though the old Israel had all been circumcised outwardly, their inner hearts had never been circumcised (Act. 7:51)! That is exactly what the author of this epistle really concerned! There are always such people in the church; by their outward appearance it’s almost impossible²⁶ to distinguish weeds from wheat (Mt. 13:24-30). This is also the reason that the author exhorts his readers: *“leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity”* and not be satisfied with all these *“basic principles”* or *“the appearance of godliness”* (2 Tim. 3:5). It is faith, but not faithfulness (such as work) that counts; it is faith, but not appearance of godliness (such as circumcision) that counts. Those who trust chariots and horses (Ps. 20:7) in this Pilgrim Progress are doomed to fail;

²⁴ “You are my people, and I am your God”.

²⁵ Greek word ‘unbelief’ (3:19) is from its root ‘faith’ (11:1).

²⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Experience That Counts*, <http://www.ccel.org/> (accessed September 18, 2013).

those who trust appearances and grasp upon any earthly certificate into Heaven are doomed to fail; only those whose eyes and faith are in Christ Jesus the Living Savior shall prevail.

As the author spoke these words to his readers, he didn't mean his readers were the people described in verses 4-6 (Heb. 6:9) nor that his readers might fall away as those people if they were not faithful. The purpose, as he compared those people with his readers, is to tell them that they cannot depend on the basic or elementary foundations because the consequence of that could be very serious. Their faith cannot be on anything other than Christ Jesus which the author would do all his best to exalt to the uttermost in this whole epistle. John the Baptist rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees: "*Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'*" (Mt. 3:8-9a) The author of this epistle would also say as John the Baptist said, "Do not presume to say to yourself, 'we have learned and been enlightened with all the Biblical truth, we have been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we have become the members of the church, we have taken the Communion with the saints, we have even been empowered by the Spirit to cast out demons (Mt. 7:21f), we have done this or that.'" NO! All those are rubbish comparing to Christ (Phil. 3:1-11). It is Christ alone, nothing else, not your work nor the sound doctrine you believe, will save you and preserve you. Our boast and assurance are only in Christ. He is a living Savior, so ours must be a living faith.

"Since they are crucifying once again"

Though there is no conjunction, the causal clause is obvious as most translations render with 'since' or 'because' which introduces the reason of that impossibility to restore that kind of people. The reason is composed of two participles (ἀνασταυροῦντας and παραδειγματίζοντας) connected with 'καί'.

Firstly, these two participles are both in present tense that becomes a clear comparison with the previous five participles which are all in aorist tense. The previous five participles describe actions already been done in the past with the aorist tense while these two participles describe a current status with the present tense. That means 'crucifying' and 'holding up to contempt' are ongoing events as long as such people live. Their life bears a terrible witness of rejecting God's priceless gift. In every day their life will become ridicule to God in the public. Such constantly bringing shame to God is so serious that it is totally impossible for them to be restored.

Secondly, the root of the participle ἀνασταυροῦντας is σταυρόω which means 'to crucify'. Some translations render its prefix ἀνα- as 'again' as some early church fathers did²⁷, but Albert Barnes commented²⁸:

"Our translators have rendered this as if the Greek were - ἀνασταυροῦντας πάλιν (anastaurountas palin) - 'crucify again', and so it is rendered by Chrysostom, by Tyndale, Coverdale, Beza, Luther, and others. But this is not properly the meaning of the Greek. The word ἀνασταυρόω anastauroō - is an 'intensive' word, and is employed instead of the usual word 'to crucify' only to denote 'emphasis'. It means that such an act of apostasy would be equivalent to crucifying him in an aggravated manner. Of course this is to be taken 'figuratively'. It could not be literally true that

²⁷ Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.

²⁸ Albert Barnes, *Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible* (Franklin, TN: Rick Meyers' E-Sword, 2012).

they would thus crucify the Redeemer. The meaning is, that their conduct would be 'as if' they had crucified him; it would bear a strong resemblance to the act by which the Lord Jesus was publicly rejected and condemned to die."

Either way of rendering is to emphasize the seriousness of such an evil action. Adding 'once again' is probably echoing the word *πάλιν* (again) in the beginning of verse 6²⁹ which modifies 'to restore', so it is the repeating of crucifixion that intensifies the seriousness. But as Barnes commented, the word *ἀνασταυροῦντας* itself already has an intensive meaning. The intensiveness is not from the repetition, but rather the nature of apostasy. As we discussed previously the description of apostasy in verses 4-5 has basically two points: they have been enlightened, have tasted, and have shared, but afterward they have fallen away. A suitable example of this should be Judas who "*after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out*" (John 13:30) to betray Jesus.

There are those who refuse the gift of God at upfront as the Gospel is preached. But there are also those who 'receive' the gift of God outwardly by verbal confession when the Gospel is preached, then give it up later. Both these two kinds of people will face serious judgments, but the sin of the second kind will be more intensive and more serious than the first kind. The author explained this even clearer in chapter 10 verse 29: "*How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?*" Regarding the Lord's Supper, Apostle Paul warned, "*Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.*" (1 Cor. 11:27) The author is not trying to frighten his readers here that they would possibly fall away, but rather telling them the precious blood of Jesus Christ that they received is most sacred gift of God so they must be careful since "*you have not come to what may be touched but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God*" (Heb. 12:18-24)

Thirdly, the dative pronoun *ἑαυτοῖς* in this verse is also important here to show the reason of impossibility to restore and its seriousness. ESV renders it as "*to their own harm*", NIV renders similarly as "*to their loss*", while KJV renders more literally as "*to themselves*". But Grotius³⁰ gives a better understanding: "They do it for themselves. They make the act their own. It is as if they did it themselves; and they are to be regarded as having done the deed." In other words, this dative pronoun indicates that the apostates described here knowingly, willingly, and completely give up the gift of God while their enlightening at the first place was passive, their tasting was restrained, and their sharing of the Spirit was partly. Again it is not that God is unable to save but rather they put themselves in the situation of the Unpardonable Sin, and they are responsible to their own rebellion.

4) Verses 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."

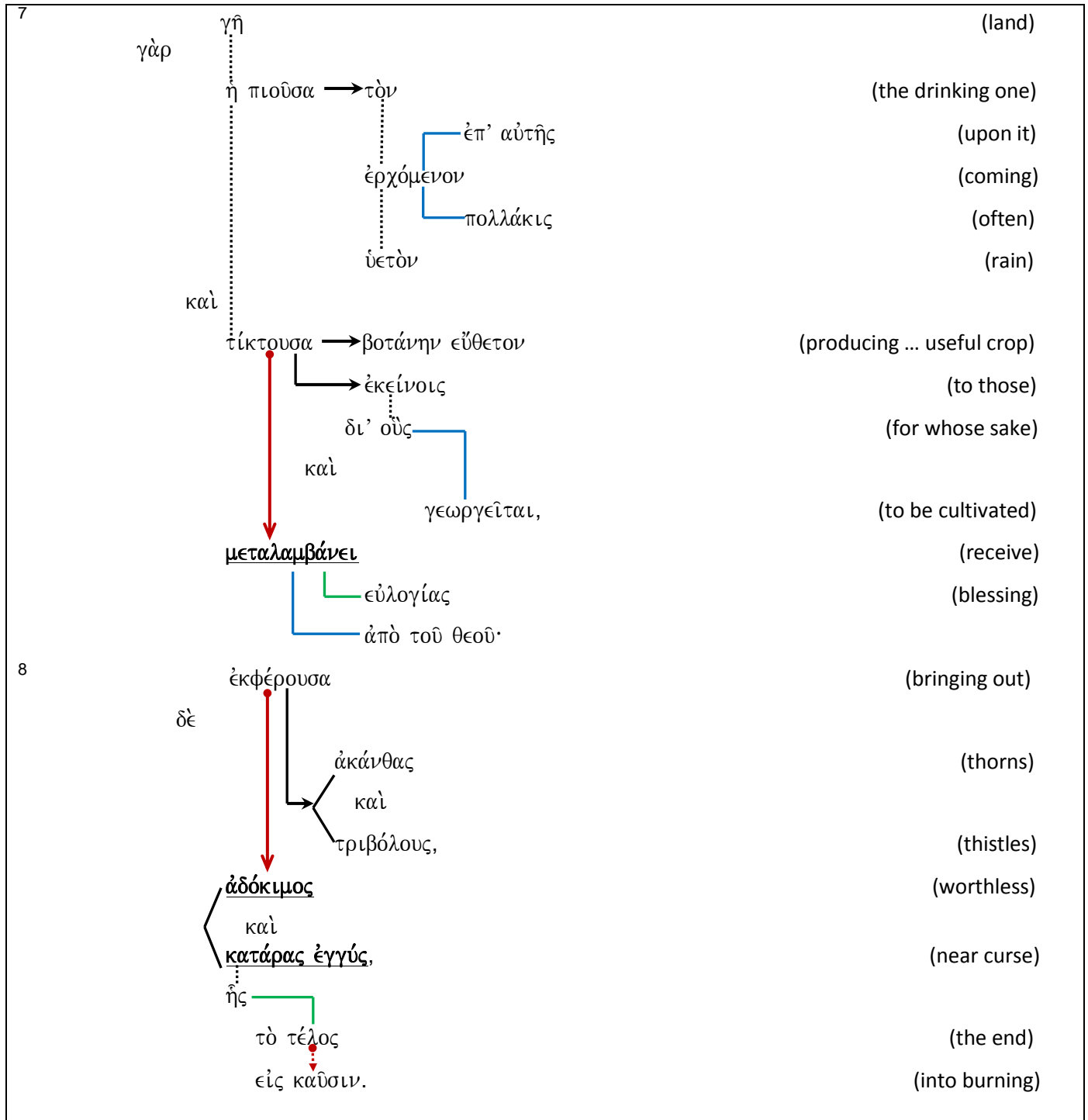
"For ..."

²⁹ That is in Greek.

³⁰ Barnes quoted Grotius in his "*Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible*".

The conjunction γάρ indicates that verses 7-8 will provide a reason as well as an illustration to the thought in verses 4-6. It is an analogy of land. As a reason, this analogy gives the rationale behind the impossibility of restoration; as an illustration it provides a vivid picture for understanding. Since the fundamental reason of that impossibility has been given in the second part of verse 6, this analogy is more of an illustration.

Greek Diagram III (Heb. 6:7-8)



Comparing with the Parable of Sowers

This analogy of land has much similarity with the Parable of Sowers (Mt. 13:1-9; 18-23) especially regarding to the different results of the land.

In the Parable of Sowers the same seed which signifies the word of the Kingdom falling into different kinds of hearts have different results. In the analogy here the lands that receive same rain but produce totally opposite results will be treated differently. The Parable of Sowers teaches: though the Gospel of Christ is preached to all, not everyone will accept this seed of life and inherit the eternal life. The fundamental reason that people won't have eternal life is their unbelief, rejection to the seed of life. But in this analogy of land, the reason of the failure of the land is not presented. The failure is certainly not that it hasn't received the rain. The participle πιόουσα (drinking) is in aorist tense that means the land has already taken the rain. And the rain is described as ἐρχόμενον (coming) which is in present tense showing its ongoing nature; and the author even add πολλάκις (often) to reinforce the sense of repetition. In case there is still any excuse, the object of the verb (coming) is also specified as ἐπ' αὐτῆς (upon it). So the fact of receiving the rain in this analogy is very clear. Then what is the reason that the land doesn't produce a useful crop but bears thorns and thistles? There are two possible answers:

- a) The land didn't receive the seeds of useful crop;
- b) The land received the seeds but is unable to produce useful crop.

With answer a) it would be the case in the Parable of Sowers when the seeds fell along the path and later were devoured by the birds. With answer b) it would be the second and third cases in the Parable of Sowers the seeds fell on rocky ground or among thorns but wouldn't be able to produce fruits. The author of this epistle clearly explained this phenomenon in chapter 4 verse 2: *"For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened"*. Again it is faith that distinguishes. The seeds and the rain are all same; the thoroughly different outcomes are due to whether or not they have faith.

Comparing with Verses 6:4-6

As an illustration to the main idea of verses 4-6, how do verses 7-8 compare with verses 4-6? What is the main point of this comparison? And in which way do verses 7-8 fortify the teaching in verse 4-6?

Verses 4-6	impossible to restore	have been enlightened, have tasted the heavenly gift, have shared in the Holy Spirit, have tasted the goodness of God's word and the power to come	have fallen away
Verses 7-8	worthless, near to being cursed, end is to be burned	have drunk the rain that often falls on	bears thorns and thistles
	receive blessing from God		produce useful crop

The emphasis of both verses 4-6 and verses 7-8 seems to be the seriousness of the result of apostasy, but in the direct context of verses 1-3, the emphasis of both verses should be

“have been enlightened ...” and “have drunk the rain”. It is not the rain that secures a useful crop. It is not the word being heard that secures receiving God’s blessing. The manifestation of immaturity is putting hope onto anything other than Christ the living Lord. This helps the readers to see the insufficiency of “*the elementary doctrine of Christ*” so that they may “*go on to maturity*”.

Just as in verse 6, most translations render *καὶ* as a conditional conjunction ‘if’, in verse 8, most translations render *δὲ* as ‘if’ or ‘but if’. However, from the diagram³¹ of these two verses the whole structure shows *δὲ* as a contrastive conjunction³² connecting “*has drunk the rain*” and “*bears thorns and thistles*” and combines them together as the subject of the whole sentence with the word *γῆ* (land). Both *πιοῦσα* (drinking) and *ἐκφέρουσα* (bearing) are in nominative case, so they are together as one subject. Therefore the sentence shouldn’t be divided into two conditional clauses: protasis³³ (if it bears thorns and thistles) and apodosis (then it will be worthless). Just as in verse 4-6, this is where the confusion rises up because the conditional clause gives people a strong impression that the final result is tightly conditioned to human efforts. But even in such an analogy of land, producing crops cannot solely depend on the land itself. Apostle Paul used similar analogy and said, “*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth*” (1 Cor. 3:6).

5) Verses 6:9-10

“Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.”

“Yet” (*δὲ*)

This conjunction is the turning point from warning (Heb. 6:4-8) to encouragement (Heb. 6:8-12). The larger context is from chapter 5 verses 11-14 in which the author rebuked the reluctance of spiritual growth and then in chapter 6 verses 1-3 the author called his readers to press on toward maturity. The confident encouragement in verses 9-12 becomes a sharp contrast to the scary warning in verses 4-8.

“*Though we speak in this way*”

Literally *εἰ καὶ* means ‘if even’, which is a concession to the main verb *Πεπεύσμεθα* (*feel sure of*). It indicates the sense of the encouragement will be much stronger than the warning that “*we speak in this way*”.

Though the concessive clause³⁴ highlights the encouragement, the adverb *οὕτως* (thus) still shows the strong sense of previous warning. This adverb shows that it is the way of speaking rather than what had been spoken that carries the weight of warning. The impossibility to be restored (Heb. 6:4-6) is scary, but might not be so scary to an irrelevant audience. Only when the readers are put side by side with those hopeless people, the warning starts to carry a real weight. As been discussed previously, the similarity between the readers and those hopeless people is “*the elementary doctrines of Christ*” or “*the basic principles*” of faith. So the author of this epistle spoke to warn his readers in the manner of a

³¹ Page 18.

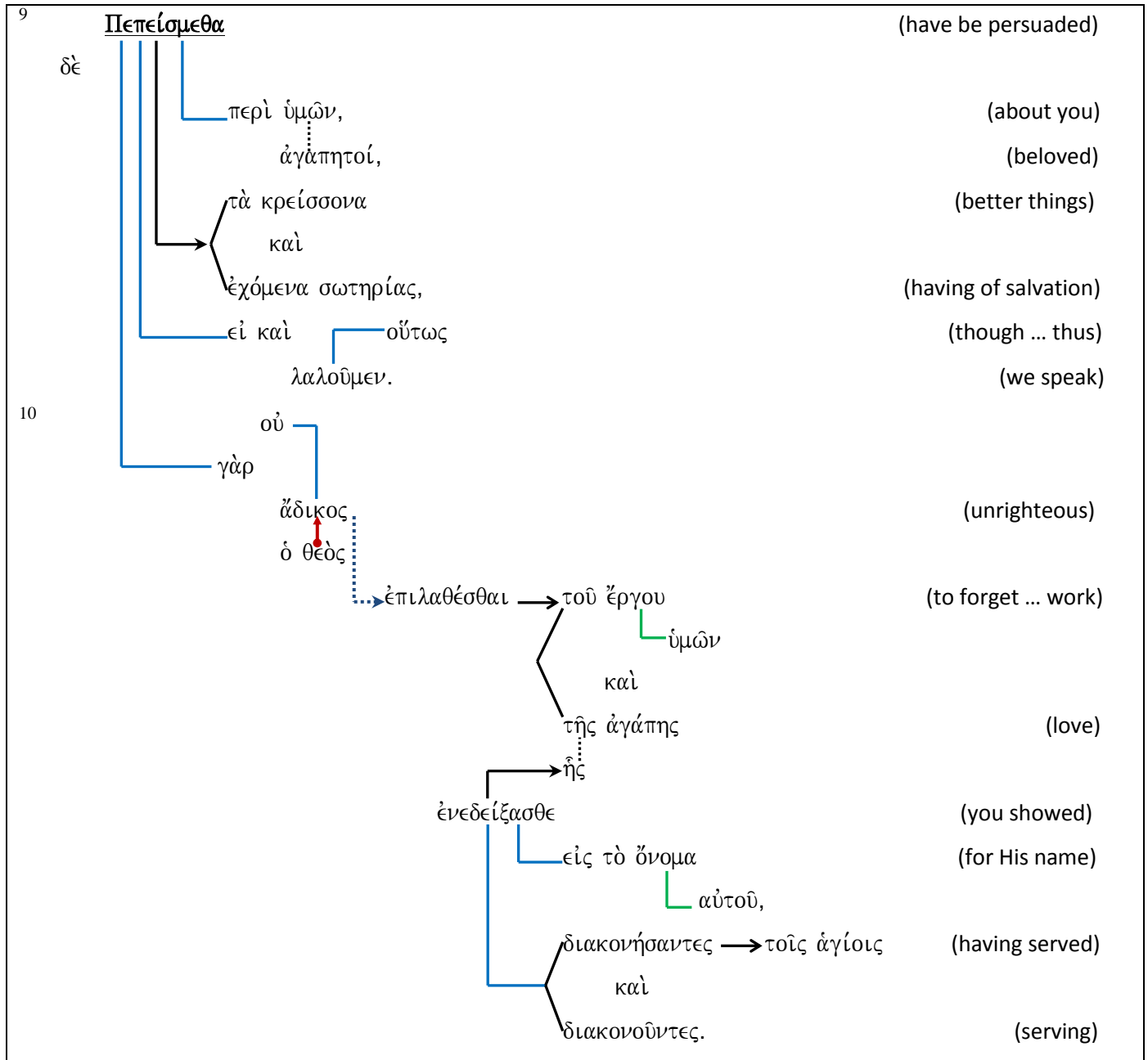
³² Daniel Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 297.

³³ Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax*, 300.

³⁴ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Robertson’s Word Picture* (Franklin, TN: Rick Meyers’ E-Sword, 2012).

comparison. But in verse 9 the author turned suddenly from warning to encouragement, that reveals in the author's mind his readers are essentially different than those hopeless people though he spoke in such a scary way, and now he, as a messenger of the Holy Spirit, even called his readers 'beloved', which undoubtedly refers to God's beloved children (1 John 3:2).

Greek Diagram IV (Heb. 6:9-10)



“We feel sure of better things - things that belong to salvation”

The main verb of this sentence Πεπεισμεθα (have be persuaded) has that sense of assurance and certainty on the one hand as ESV renders, on the other hand it also implies the proof³⁵ of a conviction as KJV renders as ‘persuaded’. So concerning his readers the author’s certainty had been proved by certain facts. This is also showed clearly in its passive mood. The essential difference of the readers from those hopeless ones is not based on the author’s goodwill.

With accusative case τὰ κρείσσονα (better things) and ἐχόμενα σωτηρίας (things belong to salvation) become the objects of the predicate (persuaded). It is not by “the better things” and “things belong to salvation” that the author was persuaded. These objects are what the author was persuaded: the author now assures that better things will happen to his readers.

The sense of this comparative adjective κρείσσονα (better) comes from the previous comparison between the readers and those hopeless people which is also in the analogy of land. In verses 7-8 the land that produces a useful crop will receive blessings from God which is much better than the end of the land that bears thorns and thistles.

Regarding to “things belong to salvation”, Marvin Vincent said, “Ἐχεσθαι with a genitive is a common Greek idiom meaning to hold one's self to a person or thing; hence to be closely joined to it.”³⁶ Barnes put it further:

“The Greek phrase here means, “near to salvation,” or things that are conjoined with salvation. So Coverdale renders it, “and that salvation is nigher.” The form of expression seems to refer to what was said in Heb. 6:8. The land overrun with briars was “nigh” to cursing; the things which Paul³⁷ saw in them were “nigh” to salvation.”³⁸

So both “better things” and “things belong to salvation” echo the previous verse (Heb. 6:7-8) in the context of a scary comparison. The reason that the author spoke of ‘nearness’ rather than ‘attaining’ is the “already but not yet” nature (Heb. 4) of the spiritual life; that is why the author calls faithful believers to “*go on to maturity*”: do not stop pushing forward! As Vincent pointed ἐχόμενα σωτηρίας (having of salvation) has the sense of “hold one's self to a person or thing”, it is not only near, but also has been ‘held’ or ‘grasped’. This reflects the certainty of the author toward his readers. Human weakness is that we always prone to easy ways, either ‘already’ or ‘not yet’, but not two together. Either we obtain already and rest totally, or we haven’t obtained yet and constantly worry. Only in the cross of Christ the two may converge.

“For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and love”

Casual conjunction γὰρ introduces the reason that the author had been persuaded (Πεπεισμεθα). In order to evaluate his readers, the author, as a judge, needs both rationale and evidences. No one other than God Himself could be the Ultimate Judge, so the author turned to God’s perspective at this point as if God is judging his readers. In the Parable of Weeds (Mt. 13:24-30), outwardly weeds and wheat are very similar and hard to be

³⁵ Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.

³⁶ Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies* (Franklin, TN: Rick Meyers’ E-Sword, 2012).

³⁷ Apostle Paul may not be the author of this epistle as many early Fathers and commentators believed.

³⁸ Albert Barnes, *Albert Barnes’ Notes on the Bible* (Franklin, TN: Rick Meyers’ E-Sword, 2012).

distinguished. As the author scarily put his readers and those hopeless people side by side based on the similarity of the elementary foundation, only God is able to vindicate His own people. That's why the author would not simply say: "we are persuaded because of your work and love", because even good works and love can be faked by the evil one. The author of this epistle would not allow his readers to be so naïve and immature to simply trust "good works" outwardly.

The negative tone of this clause is from three negative words: οὐ (not), ἄδικος (unjust), ἐπιλαθέσθαι (overlook/neglect). By using such a strong negative tone the author is to dismiss the anxiety and fear of his readers since the previous verses (Heb. 6:4-6, 7-8) are truly quite scary. But the purpose of such saying is not to scare but to admonish. The true believer of Christ has the ground of boldness, as the author encouraged his readers again and again in the whole epistle: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace" (Heb. 4:16); "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Heb. 10:22); "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls" (Heb. 10:39).

ἐπιλαθέσθαι (overlook/neglect) is an epexegetical infinitive³⁹ which clarifies the adjective 'unjust'. That means God's neglecting believer's good work and love is unjust. Since God is not unjust, it will be impossible for God to neglect believer's good work. Therefore a true believer should not worry that the righteous God would make any mistake in His ultimate judgment even though the similarity between them and those hopeless ones (Heb. 6:4-6) can be so hard to be distinguished.

The object of 'neglect' is "your work and the love" which should be in accusative normally, but here τοῦ ἔργου (the work) and τῆς ἀγάπης (the love) are in genitive case. This is a special genitive category: "Genitive After Certain Verbs (as a Direct Object)"⁴⁰. With the verb 'neglect', it expresses a strong sense of volition. The word ἐπιλανθάνομαι can mean 'forget', but with its genitive objects, it means "neglect, overlook, care nothing about"⁴¹. That indicates an active volition: willingly neglect, don't really care. But God is not unjust, and He cares, not even one of His sheep should be misjudged and perish (Lk. 15:3-7). Our confidence is in God's righteousness which is indisputably manifested in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!

"Your work and the love that you showed"

Here are the evidences for the author's being persuaded: good work and love. It seems there is a correspondence with verse 7 and 9:

Verse 7	Produce a useful crop	Receive blessing from God
Verse 9	Better things	Things that belong to salvation
Verse 10	Your work	Love that you showed for His sake

The two aspects compared above may also correlate to the passage of the Two Fruit Trees (Mt. 7:15-23) where the Lord Jesus pointed out two marks of a true believer: good

³⁹ Daniel Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Greek*, 263.

⁴⁰ Daniel Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Greek*, 63

⁴¹ Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 295

fruit and doing the Father's will. In the passage of the True Vine (John 15:1-17) the Lord also talked about these two aspects: fruit which points to good work and love which is Lord's command⁴² reflecting God's will. Work is more of the external evidence while love is more of the internal evidence. These evidences are showed not to man but to God; not to gain God's favor but to give thanks for God's favor. Though good work and even love can be faked, the true believers will inevitably have these two features as the Lord said, "*Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.*" (Mt. 7:17-18, NKJV) The confidence of the author toward his audience is based on their (genitive pronoun ὑμῶν) good work and love.

Most translations⁴³ seem to render the clause that the relational pronoun ἧς (which) introduces as to modify only the word 'love'. As love can be showed, work can also be showed (Jam. 2:18). Vincent regarded 'work' and 'love' as a whole based on KJV and he commented on this verse: "They have shown both love and work toward God's name."⁴⁴ The two adverbial participles διακονήσαντες (served) and διακονοῦντες (serving) modify the main verb 'show' to indicate the manner of showing. Serving the saints will naturally involve both external work and internal love. So what had been showed are both work and love, which are the evidences the author appeals to.

By serving the saints (Heb. 10:33-34) the readers showed their good work and love; it is not simply toward man, but ultimately toward God (εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ). The Lord said, "*Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.*" (Mt. 25:40) What vindicate are the good work and love toward God, but not those elementary foundations (Heb. 6:1). Human work and love cannot be absolutely good unless it is toward God, and it is through Christ, the only Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5), we come to God. It is by believing the name which is above all names, the name of Jesus Christ, our works and love are offered onto God as an acceptable sacrifice (Heb. 13:15). The saving faith is a living faith, a working faith. It leaves no room for any sluggishness, which was somehow the problem of the original readers as they endured fierce persecutions and cunning temptations.

6) Verse 6:11-12

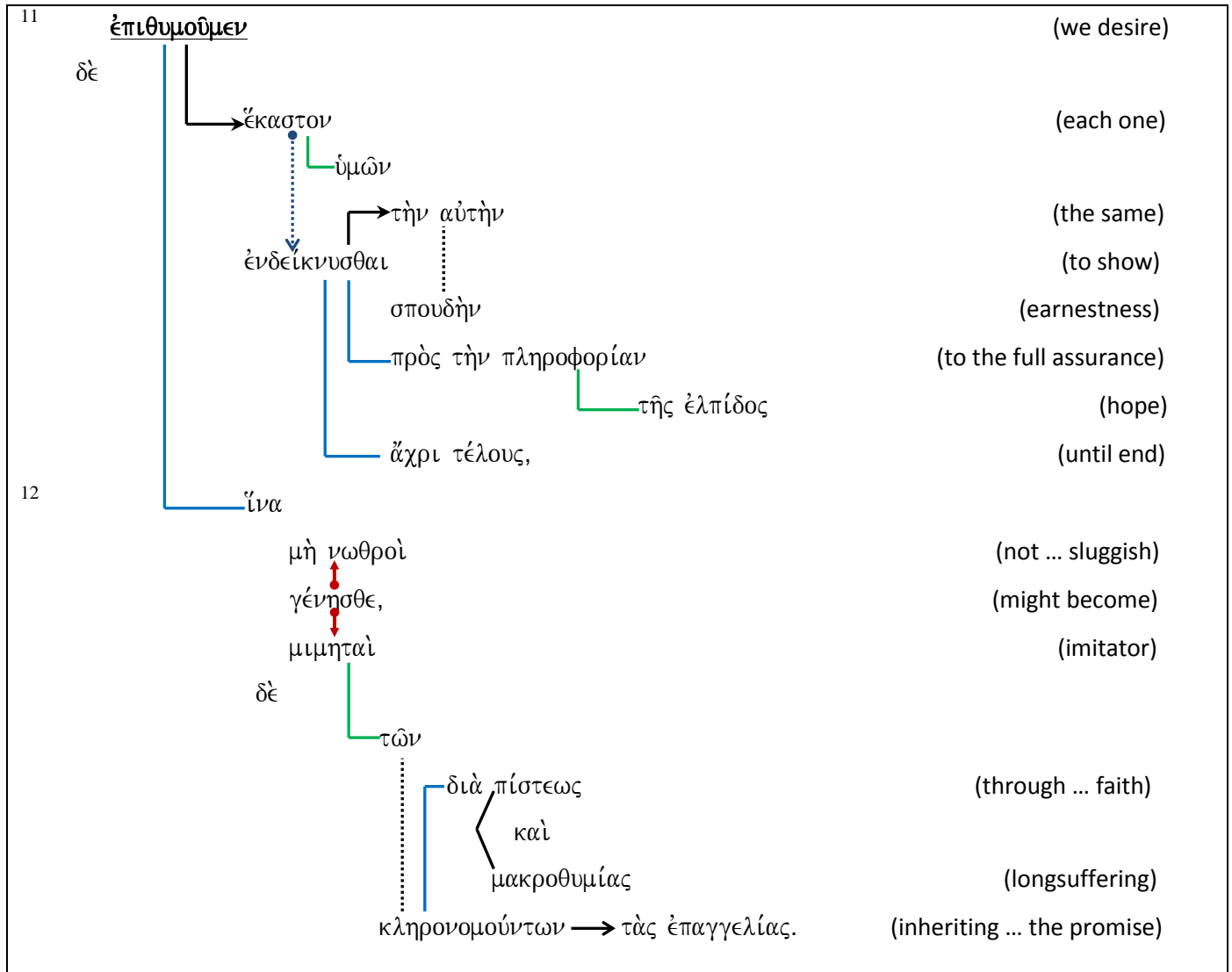
"And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."

⁴² Apostle John emphasized this new command in his first epistle.

⁴³ ESV, NIV, RSV

⁴⁴ Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies*, (Franklin, TN: Rick Meyers' E-Sword, 2012).

Greek Diagram V (Heb. 6:11-12)



“Desire ... so that ...”

At this point the author expressed his ultimate intention in this text by using a meaningful word ἐπιθυμοῦμεν (desire) in verse 11 and a purpose clause introduced by ἵνα (so that) in verse 12. The ἵνα clause modifies the main verb ‘desire’ and specifies the purpose of that ‘desire’. What was desired is expressed in two verbs ἐνδείκνυσθαι (to show) and γένησθε (might become). And the verb ἐνδείκνυσθαι (to show) is same word in verse 10. To show something is about its evidence while to become something is about its substance. As the author defined faith as “*the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*” (Heb. 11:1), the purpose of the author expressed here in this two verses is that his readers might have a solid faith with a true substance that assures and a clear evidence that convicts⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ ESV and RSV use ‘assurance’ and ‘conviction’ in translating Heb. 11:1, which is more of an objective perspective while ‘substance’ and ‘evidence’ as NKJV renders are more of a subjective perspective.

“To show ...”

The author indicated four aspects of showing the evidences of faith: ‘*each one of you*’, ‘*the same earnestness*’, ‘*full assurance of hope*’, ‘*till the end*’. All have the sense of a complete degree of this showing: ‘*each*’, ‘*same*’, ‘*full*’, ‘*end*’.

The author of the epistle must have seen the problems of backsliding and apostasy as well as their serious consequences in the church. He repeatedly warned his readers such a peril in this epistle:

- “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” (Heb. 3:12)
- “Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.” (Heb. 4:1)
- “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” (Heb. 4:11)
- “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Heb. 10:25)
- “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.” (Heb. 12:15)

The bad influence in the church can be so serious that the author must emphasize here the necessity of each one showing his earnestness. It could well be certain Jewish believers in the church who fell back to Judaism that weakened the whole church.

‘*The same earnestness*’ refers to the readers’ diligence⁴⁶ of the work and their eagerness of love mentioned in verse 10. Comparing with ‘work’, ‘love’, ‘serving’, the word σπουδήν (earnestness) here is much stronger in the sense of motivation because work and love might come out from responsibility rather than willingness. ‘*The same earnestness*’ also refers to ‘*toward His name*’ (NKJV) in verse 10. This earnestness cannot merely be of human, “*for the love of Christ compels us*” (2 Cor. 5:14) and it is toward His name we desire.

While ‘*each one of you*’ is the subject of the main verb ‘to show’; ‘*the same earnestness*’ is its object; ‘*to the full assurance of hope*’ is an adverbial modifier to the verb indicating its final goal. As people read the scary words in verses 4-6, many will fear that they might as those who fall away and have no possibility to be restored. But as we analyzed previously, by saying that the author is not identifying his readers with those hopeless ones, but rather by pointing out the similarity between the two to encourage the readers to ‘*go on to maturity*’. However, the further question is:

How can I know and be sure that I am a child of God but not those hopeless apostates if in certain ways I am similar to them?

It is certainly not by any outward performance as the Lord Jesus warned, “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Mt. 7:21). As faith is “*the conviction of things not seen*” (Heb. 11:1), to have a true faith is to have that assurance of things not seen. This is the desire of the author that his readers may leave those elementary foundations and press on to maturity of a full assurance of things they hoped for but not yet seen, so that they may never fear that they might not be the children of God and they may

⁴⁶ UBS Greek Lexicon, Bible Works 6.0

never worry that they might lose their salvation even when the author 'spoke thus' (Heb. 6:9). A mature believer will not trust elementary doctrines, will not trust his own works, his trust and assurance is Christ alone, through Whom he is "*sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it*" (Eph. 1:13b-14a; cf. 2 Cor. 1:22). If anyone doesn't have a full assurance of faith, as many spiritual infants do, he must "*show the same earnestness*" in work and love for God's name sake so that he might have such a "*full assurance of hope*". It is not that God might be pleased to accept him, but rather for his own sake that he might be able to stand firmly as a mature believer.

Again by using ἄχρι τέλους (until the end) the author expressed the idea of "already but not yet". This faith is a living faith, but not dead faith; it is a working faith, but not that we make a confession to Christ and then sleep in rest forever. A living faith will definitely and continually show its evidences of good work and love. "*He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers*" (Ps. 1:3).

"To be ..."

The ultimate purpose of the author is that his readers, so called '*beloved*', may have '*the substance of things hoped for*' (Heb. 11:1) which is true faith, and through such a living faith to inherit God's promise. The main verb γένησθε (become) refers to the substance of life, for believers that is a life of faith in Christ Jesus.

In verse 12 on the two sides of the main verb γένησθε (become) there is a contrast between νωθοὶ (sluggish) and μιμηταὶ (imitator) linked by a correlative⁴⁷ conjunction δὲ (but), which makes this 'becoming' one thing with two sides. The first side of this desired substance of life is "not sluggish". This adjective νωθοὶ (sluggish) is used in chapter 5 verse 11 in a similar way: "*since you have become dull of (νωθοι) hearing*". So this word here in verse 12 echoes verse 5:11 where the author suddenly stopped his exposition on Melchizedek and turned to the problem of the spiritual laziness. It was this spiritual laziness that bothered the author so much that he had to stop his exposition; now in verse 12 this purpose of the author is clearly expressed. The focal point of the whole text is not the scary possibility of losing one's salvation, but rather the sluggishness of the immature believers. Ellingworth noticed there's also a bold contrast⁴⁸ between νωθοὶ (sluggish) and σπουδῆν (earnestness) in verse 11. In the real Christian life, there can be two kinds of reasons for spiritual sluggishness: one is that believers lose sight of the glory of Christ; the other is that believers lose sight of the passion of Christ. The readers of this epistle must have been in trouble with the first case, and that is why the author highly exalted Christ in the whole Epistle. Hyper Calvinism has trouble with the second case, that's why they also tend to be lazy and lack of fervent zeal.

Now the second side of this desired substance of life is 'imitator' of the faithful ones. While spiritual laziness is a common problem, another common problem is the bad influences as we discussed previously⁴⁹ in the church, and the laziness might well be from the bad influences of apostasy and backsliding. But God's people shouldn't imitate those for whom it is impossible to be restored. The hard saying in verses 4-6 is particularly aimed at

⁴⁷ Daniel Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax*, 297 (it is also called 'paired conjunction')

⁴⁸ Ellingworth and Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews*, 122

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this issue and is to warn the immature believers: don't imitate those who might be very similar to you outwardly and say "we have learned the elementary doctrines and that's enough." Don't imitate those people and naively put your trust in the basic principles, baptism, church membership, emotional excitement, and anything other than Christ. But imitate those "*who through faith and patience inherit the promises*".

The genitive pronoun *δια* (through) indicates the manner of the verb *κληρονομούντων* (inherit) answering the question how the believers fully receive what God promised in Christ. The object of the verb is *ἐπαγγελίας* (promise) which is something not yet received but for sure as God is the One Who promised. The author then expounded the certainty of this promise of God in the following paragraph (Heb. 6:13-20).

This 'how' question here is really crucial in every believer's spiritual life. It relates to the previous key question of conviction,⁵⁰ "how can I be convicted that I am a true believer?" Verse 11 answers that question while verse 12 answers this question of being. Two questions together point to 'faith', it is by faith alone, "*my righteous one shall live by faith*" (Heb. 10:38; cf. Hab. 2:4). In verse 12 the word *πίστεως* (faith) emphasizes a belief toward God's promise that is 'hoped for' but 'not seen' yet. There are all kinds of visible things in Judaism such as circumcision which were tempting the readers to lose their sight of God's promise in Christ. But all those priesthood, covenant, tabernacle, law, and sacrifices are only shadows (Heb. 10:1) of the much better things in Christ. Without faith, which means without "*the substance of things hoped for*" and "*the evidence of thing not seen*", nobody will be able to inherit the promise of God. But how can we be sure of things hoped for? And how can we be convicted by things unseen for 2000 years? Praise the Lord! It is not by our own wisdom or judgment; it is by the Cross of Jesus Christ we are sealed with the Holy Spirit! It is by the Gospel of Christ we receive the seed of life! It is by Christ alone we are formed in the perfect image of God and have that invisible substance of faith! Through such an intangible reality of faith we shall inherit the promises of God.

Though faith is invisible, it will surely produce visible evidences. A true and living witness will inevitably⁵¹ bear the character of *μακροθυμίας* (patience), which means longsuffering and forbearance⁵². Satan always attempts to stop the steps of the Pilgrims with brutal persecutions. No one would be able to overcome him, "his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal"⁵³. But praise the Lord! As we ever lift up our eyes "*looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God*" (Heb. 12:2), all the fear and doubts will be gone, the wind will cease, the sea shall calm for "Christ has regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed His own blood for my soul."⁵⁴ All God's people bear this same witness (Heb. 11) as Apostle Paul said "*I bear on my body the marks of Jesus*" (Gal. 6:17).

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⁵¹ 2 Tim. 3:12 "*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*"

⁵² Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*

⁵³ Martin Luther's hymnal "A mighty Fortress Is Our God"

⁵⁴ Philip Bliss' hymnal "It Is Well with My Soul"

4. Relevance of this Text (Heb. 6:1-12) to the Controversy

This paper cannot answer the “once saved always saved” controversy based on this single text⁵⁵ (Heb. 6:1-12), but rather to explore the relevance of this text to this controversy based on an in-depth exegesis. In other word, it is to answer the question: how would the author of this epistle answer the “once saved always saved” controversy? This can be divided into three sub-questions.

1) Who are the people that this text talked about?

Genuine believers or not?

The controversy is particularly related to verses 4-6 of this text. Arminianism uses this text as a proof of the possibility of losing one’s salvation, and they would strongly argue that the description of “*who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift*” refers to true believers. However, Calvinism doesn’t agree that such a description should necessarily be of true believers, and they would emphasize the falling away proves their unbelief and then such people would not be genuine believers.

What is genuine faith?

Behind the disagreement are the different definitions of ‘genuine believer’. Calvinism distinguishes true believer and false believer while Arminianism seems not really concern that differentiation. For Arminianism, even those that the Lord Jesus mentioned “*prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name*” (Mt. 7:22) are genuine believers⁵⁶. But Calvinism emphasizes the genuine faith of the believer, which is not of man’s decision of free will, but rather God’s free gift toward man through Jesus Christ⁵⁷. This difference between Arminianism and Calvinism is based on their different anthropologies. Calvinism strongly emphasizes sinner’s total depravity while Arminianism believes that man is able and responsible to believe. The Arminian anthropology is based on their understanding of the doctrine of God: for them, the righteousness of God will be jeopardized by the doctrine of unconditional election.

Answer according to this text

From the exegesis of this text, we conclude with two things: firstly, the emphasis of the author in verses 4-6 is not the possibility of falling away but rather the impossibility of being restored⁵⁸; secondly, those who were described in verses 4-6 are just like those Israelites⁵⁹ who fell in the wilderness because of unbelief, the description provided (Heb. 6:4-6) is not about genuine believers.

If a man can be called believer without a genuine faith, then according to Arminianism, he may lose his salvation and the statement “once save always saved” is wrong. However, if a man needs genuine faith to be a true believer, then his salvation is always in God’s hand and

⁵⁵ That will be impossible since this controversy involves many more other texts.

⁵⁶ In that debate happened in 2006 in Hong Kong, a pastor mentioned Mt. 7:22 and said, “they cast out demons, if they are not believers, who can be believers?”

⁵⁷ *Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)*, chapter 14, section 1: “the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts”

⁵⁸ Though the verses show the possibility of falling away, it is not the emphasis of the author.

⁵⁹ Another two typical cases are Jacob’s brother Saul and Judas who betrayed Jesus. The fundamental difference between Jacob and Saul was not their genetic genes, but faith. This is also true between Judas and the other eleven disciples including Peter.

he won't lose it. The Biblical nature of Calvinism is based on its correct understanding of the doctrine of God's sovereignty. God sovereignly chose His own people in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). Because His election is in Christ the One Who was crucified, died, and risen again, God has all authority (Phil. 2:9-11) to proclaim the glory of His absolute righteousness and abundant grace: "*I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy*" (Ex. 33:19).

2) Why are they mentioned in this text?

Could false believers become a valid warning to the genuine believers?

If the salvation of a genuine believer is in the hand of the Almighty God and a genuine believer won't lose it anyway, then why would the author of this epistle mention those people without a genuine faith and the scary situation of impossibility of being restored in verses 4-6? If the original readers were genuine believers as the author assured (Heb. 6:9-10) and they would by no means lose their salvation, how would verses 4-6 become a valid warning to the readers?

How can I know that my faith is genuine?

It is one thing to say "a genuine believer won't lose his salvation", but it is another thing to say "I (personal conviction) won't lose my salvation", because that will presuppose "I am a genuine believer". Many different ways are suggested to assure the genuineness of faith⁶⁰, but a lot of them are apparently invalid, such as a verbal confession, baptism, church membership, etc. It seems that the author of this epistle appeals to "*the work and love showed toward the name of God*" (Heb. 6:10). As discussed previously, though faith is invisible it has its internal substance and external evidence. "*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God*" (Rom. 8:16). A genuine faith is a living faith that needs a living heart to witness.

Answer according to the text

The reason that the author mentioned those for whom it is impossible to be restored is the similarity between them and the immature believers. The problem of the immature believers is that they would tend to grasp those elementary things but lose their sight on Christ. They would even claim that they are Calvinists and believe the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, but neither Calvinism nor any doctrine can save sinners, only the Living Christ saves! The author of the epistle mentioned those hopeless people in order to warn his readers that they might no longer boast on "*have once been enlightened, have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come*", but boast Christ alone.

3) How should genuine believers respond to this text?

What did the author expect from his readers?

As the Fallen Condition Focus of this text for the original readers is not the possibility of losing salvation (Heb. 6:9), but rather their spiritual immaturity and sluggishness (Heb. 5:11), the expected response of the author was that his original readers would earnestly (Heb. 6:11) press on to maturity (Heb. 6:1). But with the pressure of the fierce persecutions

⁶⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009)

and the heretic temptations of Judaism, how would they make progress in their pilgrim? To know the truth is one thing, but to live out the truth is rather another thing.

How to live out a balanced genuine faith?

There is a tension in spiritual growth related to this text. On the one hand, God secures salvation for the believers with genuine faith, so we should fully rest in God's sovereignty; but on the other hand, believers are responsible to be faithful to God, so genuine believers shall work hard for God's glory. The extreme of Hyper-Calvinism is to over emphasize God's sovereignty and by doing so they would overlook the responsibility of pursuing holiness with hard works. This extreme can reach to such a point that they would even regard any human effort as an insult to the grace of God and then give themselves a perfect excuse for any form of spiritual sluggishness. On the other hand, the extreme of Arminianism is to over emphasize man's responsibility and by doing so they underestimate God's sovereignty. This extreme reaches to the point that salvation would be in the hands of man and then put every believer under a constant fear of losing their salvation. So the real challenge for any serious believer is: how to live out a balanced genuine faith? How to have the full assurance of salvation and the earnestness to pursue holiness at the same time?

Answer according to the text

The ultimate answer to all the questions is Christ! *"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end"* (Rev. 22:13). How could the son of David be his Lord (Mt. 22:45)? How can the Son of Man, Jesus the Nazarene, be the Son of God, Christ the Messiah? It is because of the Cross, in which Christ Jesus brings all things together. It is in the Cross of Christ we are fully assured the hoped salvation (Heb. 11:1); it is also in the Cross of Christ we are completely convinced the unseen promise. It is only when we look to Christ, *"the author and finisher of our faith"* (NKJV), we could bring the full assurance and burning earnestness together in the real life of a genuine believer. That is what the human author of this epistle and the Holy Spirit expected for his readers: to be *"imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises"* (Heb. 6:12).

5. Conclusion

The study of this particular text (Heb. 6:1-12) has been a great blessing to the writer of this paper personally. The perfection of God's word is amazingly showed through the exegesis on this key text. The word inspired by the Holy Spirit is truly *"living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart"* (Heb. 4:12). It gives much light to the "once saved always saved" controversy.

Though God's people are called to be peace-makers (Mt. 5:9), faithful Christians have no freedom to compromise *"the faith which was once delivered to the saints"* (Jude 3) in front of the deceitful heresies and dreadful persecutions. This is very relevant for the contemporary churches, in which Satan will definitely not stop his attacking to the Church simply because peaceful Christians want to graciously avoid the heat of any doctrinal debate and controversy. Devoted Christians should be confident with the Word of God in the midst of all the tough controversies and heartbreaking divisions. The Word of God still and will forever has the great power to pierce into the division of soul and spirit to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart. The Word is inspired not to divide the churches over the controversies such as "once saved always saved", the Word is given to imprint the perfect image of God through Christ (Heb. 1:3) that all the genuine children of God may become one in Christ unto the Father in Heaven!

May the divine love of such a merciful Father, the grace of the crucified yet risen Savior our Lord Jesus Christ, and the sealing assurance of the Holy Spirit be with all the genuine believers that our life might become a solid testimony of an unshakable confidence toward the promise of God and burning passion for the Glory of the Triune God! Amen and Amen!

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