

Record of Sermons delivered during the month of
September 2018

(added progressively after each Sunday)

(see following pages)

Jesus Christ Our Great High Priest

per S Olyott

These people, called Hebrews, to whom this letter was written, had been Jews but were now Christians. But they were seriously thinking of giving up the Christian Faith; going back to Judaism.

This letter is also appropriate to many people, especially today.

Consider those who are 'visible' Christians. They have made a profession of faith. Yet nevertheless, they ponder in their mind: giving this all up. Perhaps they are the only ones who admit to being a Christian in their group at work or school. They may think every day as they meet others, "Is it really possible that I am the only one who is right and all the others are wrong?"

People don't understand you. Is it really worthwhile being different all the time? And the thought is crossing your mind, "Why not give it all up and be like them".

This letter is especially important to people in this situation

The Apostle has already warned that not to continue – to go on and on in the Christian life is to go back. And that means to go out! There are only two options: you only get closer to Christ, who is the light and Glory of God; or you turn your back and then the only direction is – into 'outer' darkness.

There are only two options for the person who says they are a Christian: go on or go out.

Last week, in Chapter 4 we saw, how to ensure that you go on. Two principles:

- expose yourself regularly to the Word of God and
- have some understanding of what it means to have Jesus Christ to be your high priest. To whom you can go for mercy, when you fail, and for whom you can go for grace in your time of need.

So seeing Jesus in the Word and going to Him in prayer, defines the person who continues to make progress in the Christian life.

Now having mentioned that Jesus Christ is a high priest, some of the original hearers of this letter would have been startled. They would have said something like this: "How can you refer to the Lord Jesus Christ as a High Priest? We know that you have already done it, in Chapter 2:17, you called Him a 'faithful high priest'. In 3:1 you called Him the 'Apostle and High Priest of our profession'. And now you've just done it again. (Chapter 5) How can you call Jesus Christ a High Priest? In what way is He qualified to be such a priest?" That is the question which is being answered in today's reading.

This is the very 'core' of the letter. Something that is not explicitly shown in any of the other letters. The High Priestly Ministry of Christ. This is the dominant 'note' of Hebrews.

What does it mean for Jesus Christ to be High Priest? And in what way is He qualified to be such a Priest?

This teaching must have had a profound effect on the original hearers, because to an Old Testament Jew the greatest religious office of all was that of High Priest. To the Jew it is Aaron, the original High Priest, who is revered with great respect.

One of the attractions for these people who were thinking of going back, was that they could go back to the glories of the priestly ministry – the High Priest in particular.

So what the Apostle is going to do is this: He's going to show to us that the Lord Jesus Christ is a High Priest, so to be able to have a High Priest you don't have to turn your back on Christianity and go back to Judaism.

And secondly, that Jesus Christ is a greater High Priest, than any High Priest that ever existed in the Old Testament times. Therefore if you turn from Christ back to Judaism, you're not turning back to something greater, but you're turning from the greater to something lessor. Once more he is showing to them the greatness of Christ and the poverty of every alternative!

There is no real difference between a priest and a High Priest. The High Priest is an exalted version. So in verses 1 -10 the Apostle is going to begin his discussion by talking about the qualifications which are essential for a priest.

There are **two** qualifications that a man must have to be a priest. Then he is going to show that the Lord Jesus Christ perfectly meets those qualifications.

- The first qualification is mentioned in verses 1-3:
To understand it you must understand what a priest is. Never mix up priest with prophet. A prophet is a man who speaks **for** God to men. (His ministry is 'vertically downwards'.) A priest speaks **for** men to God. ('Vertically upwards'.)¹ He represents men to God.

So the first qualification for a priest who is to represent men, is that he must be a man. (Verse 1²) From a group of men one man is taken ... Has to be a man. Then being a man, he acts for man. And the way he acts for man is mentioned

1 "Priestly absolution" is a nonsense term. People may say that because a priest stands in the Name of God, he can pronounced that your sins are forgiven. That there is something priestly about standing the the Name of God and addressing men. That is not a priestly function! 'Priestly absolution is a contradiction of terms. If anyone could do that it would be a prophet. In the New Testament it is plain that Prophets are finished and equally plain that Priests (in the Old Testament concept) are finished.

2 *For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.*

in verse 1. That's what the priest did. The people approached God by means of the priest. If they had a gift to give to God it was put in the priest's hands to do this. If they had a sacrifice to sacrifice to God, it was the priest that acted for them. He was a man representing men to God. Qualification # 1 is that he must be a man.

(verse 2) Being a man he can understand human weakness. Here is an unformed (ignorant) person: he comes to the priest and says, "I don't know what God requires of me." So the priest can sympathise – he's a man himself – so he can help him. Here is another who is wandering, he's out of the way (wayward). "I'm far from God," he says, "I want to return to God. I don't know what sacrifice I can bring." So the priest, being a man himself, can sympathise with him and can help him.

Also, being a man, he is prone to the same things that these people have fallen into. All in verse 2!

So he deals with men tenderly, because he shares the same infirmities. Prone to the same sins. He's 'part and parcel' of the same human race.

Indeed, verse 3, the Old Testament priest was a sinner and when he offered sacrifices on behalf of the people he represented, he had to offer a sacrifice for himself as well.

Qualification #1 for a priest is that he must be a man. The humanity of the priest is basic, essential.

- Qualification #2 in verse 3:

No man can just decide to be a priest, in the Old Testament context. A priest can't appoint himself. He's representing men, so he must be a man, but because he is representing men to God, so he must be acceptable to God. And to be acceptable to God he must be appointed by God.³ That's the way Aaron came into the priesthood. He didn't seek the priesthood – didn't deserve the priesthood. God called him into the priesthood. At that time a grandson of Kohath (a clan leader of the tribe of Levi) named Korah – supported by 150 prominent Levites – rebelled against God's appointed priests – in particular Aaron and his descendants. All who rebelled were immediately destroyed by the fierce anger of God.

So to be a priest one must be a man and be appointed by God.

Did the Lord Jesus Christ meet these two qualifications? Is the Apostle justified in calling Christ a high priest? So the text goes on to show that He does, perfectly. But the order is reversed. Firstly, appointed by God and secondly being a man amongst men.⁴

³ *And no one takes this honour for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.*

⁴ The order is reversed, to reflect the fact that while the Levitical priest was initially a man and was appointed a priest, Christ was appointed a priest in eternity and then became a man in 'time'.

- (verse 5 f) The Lord Jesus Christ didn't glorify (exalt) Himself. He didn't take this 'office' to Himself. He was appointed to this office by God. "You'll remember," says the Apostle, "That God spoke certain words to Christ."⁵ "But," says the Apostle, "Those aren't the only words He's been hearing." Look at verse 6.⁶ So co-extensively with the words of verse 5 – appointing Him to be God's Son, Christ has heard the words of verse 6 – appointing Him to be God's priest.
- **So our Lord Jesus Christ is an eternal priest.** (this is made even more definite in the footnotes) A priest forever in *the order of Melchizedek*.⁷ Which has the implication that a priest after the order of Melchizedek – rather than one of Aaron – is an eternal priest.

The second qualification has been met!

- How about the first qualification mentioned earlier? He has to be a man amongst men. Verse 7 *In the days of His flesh ...* the eternal Son of God had days of flesh. The eternal priest came amongst us as a man. More profound words! In verses 7 & 8 we are told that our Lord had a human experience. An experience of learning. An experience of limitation.

During that period as a man He had the harrowing and awful experiences of Gethsemane. From the mouth of the Lord Jesus came prayers and supplication with loud cries and tears, unto Him who was able to save Him from death. Remember this is the eternal Son of God who is being spoken of – who has life in Himself. Before Him lay the Cross. He was to die and in doing so He was to be made sin – although He knew no sin.

The man, Christ Jesus, who is the eternal Son of God shrunk from that horrific experience, because He is holy and undefiled, separate from sinners, yet to be made sin! To bear the punishment of sin. He was in agony and His soul was sorrowful – His sweat was like great drops of blood. What an intensity of suffering! All this as He was a man. He even prayed that He might be delivered 'out of⁸ death'

And He was, for although He died and was under the power of death, He was raised again in the power of an endless life. Never to die again!

5 *You are my Son,
today I have begotten you*";

Here again is that great mystery – as long as God has been God, God the Father has been speaking to God the Son. God the Son IS eternal, but throughout His existence, every moment, He has heard these words. Our Lord Jesus Christ hears those words all the time. God the Father speaks those words all the time. Because although our Lord Jesus Christ had no beginning, He is being eternally 'begotten of the Father'. All that He is He owes to the Father. He's not God in a lesser sense, but all He is He owes to the Father – it's a profound mystery. It can't be explained. Only stated!

Christ has been hearing those words as long as He has had existence – which is always!

6 *as he says also in another place,
"You are a priest for ever,
after the order of Melchizedek."*

7 This reference will be explained more fully in Chapter 7 of Hebrews.

8 The preposition ἐκ (ek) is frequently translated as 'out of' rather than 'from'.

He has the 'keys' of death and the grave.

He was saved out of death because of His reverence (piety) and His godliness. His godly fear. All mentioned there in verse 7.

Yes the eternal Son of God became a man and as a man approached God. He went through an experience as a man.

Look at verse 8. It talks about Him learning obedience. Now He's the everlasting Son. But by coming to Gethsemane ... then to Calvary our Lord learned obedience in a way that otherwise He would never have learned it. Calvary tested the obedience of the Son of God.⁹ Yet his obedience at Gethsemane and at Calvary to the Father was just as complete as it was before He became a man, becoming the eternal Son of God in glory.

Our Lord became a man amongst men! Our Lord became a perfect man amongst men.¹⁰ Our Lord lived and fleshed out a perfect life. Here ... in a family ... in a school ... at the carpenter's bench ... in a neighbourhood ... amongst friends. Our Lord went through trials that He never would have gone through, if He had never become flesh.

He continued to be what He always was, but became what He was not. An obedient man. A perfect man.

Then in verse 9: Being made perfect – that means being made perfectly fitted for His 'office', having gone through every trial that we go through. It was in that way he became fitted for His office of High Priest.

Appointed by God – a man amongst men. The two great qualifications are met. He is perfect for the task. And being perfect for the task He *became the source (author) of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ...*

Isn't this so profound? The eternal Son of God. The eternal Priest. The man. There is a man who is called by God: Priest. There is a man who is an eternal Priest. Many men have been temporary priests, but there is a man who is an eternal Priest. All other priests had to offer sacrifices for their own sins. But there is One who is a Perfect Priest. A perfect man.

So the Apostle has told us that Christ became a man ... and is a man. A perfect man! And He in eternity was appointed to an eternal priesthood.

Once again: there is no one like the Lord Jesus Christ. That the priesthood of Christ is superior and absolutely unique. So the person who walks out from that glorious Priesthood back to the old Levitical priesthood is walking from the greater to the less.

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May it please God that all present, through Jesus Christ, shall have life through His Name.

⁹ In the English language there is a difference between the word 'innocence' and the word 'virtue'. Innocence: Our Lord had innocence before Calvary – His obedience to His Father was untested. Then His obedience to His Father went through this extreme trial. The result of which, showed 'virtue'!

¹⁰ The first man was created without sin and in his 'probation' was innocent – untested in obedience. He failed at the 'fall'. But the Second Adam didn't. Jesus Christ the only tested perfect man!

A Rebuke and an Exhortation

per S Olyott

Remember the Hebrews were Christians, who were thinking of giving up the Christian faith and going back to their Judaism. For any who in these times are also nursing the thought that you might go back to what you were before, this whole letter is especially important. God now is speaking to your needs as He was then to those Hebrews.

The Apostle has bluntly warned the Hebrews that there are two alternatives: you either go on ... and on ... in the Christian life and make progress; or you turn your back on the glory of God – as it is in the face of Jesus Christ – and you walk out into 'outer darkness'.

Only these two alternatives: Like riding a bicycle. Keep moving or you fall off!

He's been very forthright with the Hebrews, and with us. In no uncertain terms he has spelt it out several times already. He will do it several times more before the end of this letter.

But he has not just left it at this. He has given the remedy.

We saw in the previous chapter that there are two great principles for persevering in the Christian faith:

- you **MUST** expose yourself to the Word of God. Have you done that since this remedy was first prescribed? Has your mind and heart been exposed and 'opened' to the Word of God? If this is not the case our preaching is vain and pointless! Has there been exposure to the Word of God: preached, written, explained.
- The other great principle of perseverance in the Christian faith is an understanding of the High Priestly Ministry of Jesus Christ. Refer now to the last verse from last week: when you have sinned since then, have you been in prayer to that High Priest to obtain mercy? Have you in the last week – when everything has been difficult – been to that High Priest to obtain grace and help in time of need.

That's the secret of Christian progress. The 'old fashioned' disciplines of: the Bible and Prayer (not just saying prayers). Prayer – where we lay hold of the High Priest, the great Apostle of our Confession.

In the verses leading up to today's section: Chapter 5:1-10 the Apostle has to explain what it means for Jesus Christ to be a High Priest. He explains why he is quite entitled to use the term 'High Priest' of Christ.

But he says, “Jesus Christ isn't a priest of the Old Testament variety. They were Levitical priests – of the Tribe of Levi.” Twice he has told us that Jesus Christ is a

High Priest, after the order of Melchizedek. And it's because he has said that that he now comes in with his rebuke.

Chapter 5:11 to the end of the Chapter is a rebuke. The Apostle knew the stage at which the people were. He knew that the moment he mentioned that Jesus Christ is a Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, they wouldn't understand what he was talking about. Do you?

Look at verse 11: "I'd like to say," he in effect says, "A great deal more about this subject of Jesus Christ's special status as High Priest. I'd like to say a great deal more about Melchizedek. BUT what's the point? You wouldn't understand!"

It is one of the deep truths of the Christian Faith! It's *hard to explain*. And they in his judgement were not very spiritually quick on the uptake – *become dull in hearing*. The Hebrews found difficult things impossible to grasp.

"What I want to say about Melchizedek," he says, "is beyond your capacity."

That leads him to the rebuke: (verse 12) "At this stage in your Christian life, you ought to be teaching other people the Christian Faith." This he says to every member of the Church. "But instead – what is it with you? You're still in the kindergarten class, as it were. You need to have someone come along and teach you what are the very basics of the Christian Faith and the Christian Life. (You should by now have passed through all the grades; graduated from school and then been to teacher training and beyond! And now be able to teach others the Christian Faith.)"

"But instead, all those years have gone by, and you're still in kindergarten!"

So he has used the 'picture' of a child at school. Then, he changes the picture at the end of the verse to that of a 'suckling' infant. ¹² ... *You need milk, not solid food, ...* . An infant can't 'get his teeth' into anything solid – hasn't got any teeth anyway.

"That's like you." he says, "You can't take any 'solid' teaching. You can't 'get your teeth' into anything. You can't 'stomach' it. Although you've been Christians for 'ages and ages' all I'm able to give you is milk. Because if I give you meat you can't digest it. Can't make use of it. You're totally unused to it. I have no choice but to keep giving you milk."

With these two 'pictures' we can see the great seriousness of the Hebrew's condition.

How sad it is in the human experience when a baby is born but doesn't develop as it should. So that at an adult age it is still physically or mentally no better than a baby. The parents are, and continue to be, brokenhearted. In the spiritual sense this is the condition of the Hebrews and God their Father must have been brokenhearted.

Of course there is no concern about a very new Child of the Faith – a recent convert, say. The natural condition here is to be fed on 'milk' not yet 'meat'. But the Hebrews in this case were not new in the Faith!

But instead of their being now teachers of others, yet they still required the 'basics'. This is the cause for grave concern.

That's the reason for the rebuke. Because of the spiritual condition that they were in.

They should have been able to teach others what it means for Christ to be a High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Not only could they not teach it, they couldn't understand it.

(Verse 13) "To remain on milk", he says, "Is to remain a baby. You're unskillful *in the word of righteousness*. You can't handle God's Word! You're just not used to God's Word. You don't know your way around God's Word. You're not accustomed to the great truths of God's Word. No wonder you can't grasp the truth that Jesus Christ is a High Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."

"Oh," he says verse 14, "The sign of a mature believer is that he can take strong 'meat'.

How do people get from the state of immaturity to maturity. They get there by constant use. By constant use of the Word of God they are able to take more and more substantial teaching, until they are able to 'digest' and assimilate, really solid teaching.

What's the 'sign' that you have reached such maturity? You are able to distinguish good from evil. Truth from error. More discernment in Doctrine. In behaviour you know what is right and people can't 'pull the wool' over your eyes, so to speak. You can recognise the good from the bad.

The key word is 'discernment'! The sign of maturity.

This then is a very valuable passage. He's told us earlier in the letter, the importance of going on ... and on ... He's told us how to achieve this: expose yourself to the Word of God; pray to your Great High Priest. But now for the first time in the letter, he's given us a measure by which we can measure ourselves.

You can measure yourself now! As to whether you are growing up. You've got a progress marker (a 'milestone') which will tell you if you are making any progress. For the first time in the letter, we have a means by which we can tell: whether we are making spiritual progress. Just keep the two 'pictures' in our mind: the school progress; and the baby growing – from milk until it can at last take meat.

To help you 'discover' for yourself, this morning: if you are making progress in the Christian Life. Here are some questions to answer:

- Can you teach other people anything? Or are you the sort of Christian who still has to be taught the fundamentals? Someone has to keep going over, and over again the most basic things of all.¹¹
- Are you a Christian who now finds that there were things that seemed impossibly difficult, which you now understand? (If a little baby is given a great roast beef, there is no hope. Well perhaps you're not ready for the roast beef, but even a youngish baby can take a rusk or a digestive biscuit. Consider the things you couldn't assimilate which you now can. Now they are a 'matter of course'. This is measurable progress.)
- Are there truths which when you were first confronted with them, you thought, "I'll never grasp that." But now you're able to look back with a grateful memory and see that you at least have begun to understand.

This is how we measure how we are growing. Are you (verse 13) *unskilled in the word of righteousness, ...?* Are there parts of the Bible that are still strange to you? Or are you accustomed to them. Do you now, by a constant use of Scripture, understand better, what is right and what is wrong? What is truth what is falsehood? Are you more clearly able to distinguish one from the other? Or do you still confuse right with wrong, truth with error?

These are tests we must apply to our Christian lives. It's no good our saying, "Yes I recognise that I must go on ... and on ... and on. Yes I know how to do it." If we can not see if we are – going on and on. If we cannot see if we are making any progress.

Naturally, if a person is recently converted, there is no need for them to be troubled – this year! New Christians shouldn't be troubled by this Sermon. But if they were to review such a sermon in a year's time, then if there were no change they should be troubled by it then! There's nothing wrong with being a baby if you have just been born. If only up to the rusk stage, because of being very young in the faith, no one should go away with a weary and afflicted conscience, because the really difficult and solid teachings of the Word of God are out of reach – at present.

But if your a Christian, who's been a Christian for some while, with no obvious growth in your understanding, then what is being brought to you is God's message to beware the peril of a static life. You are as much a tragedy as a babe who has never grown. As far as God, the parent, is concerned, He will shed tears over you as any mother would over a child who would never grow up.

The danger is acute as the Apostle has spelt it out.

In the next Chapter he further emphasises the peril of staying as we are.

¹¹ In this you could have a lot of company. Even 500 years ago Martin Luther was asked why he preached Justification by Faith every week. His answer was, that they need it every week. In our Century, in many ways, the state of Biblical knowledge and understanding is inferior to earlier Centuries.

So finally today we make a short review of what we will learn from the beginning of Chapter 6 more fully next week.

6:1-3. After the Rebuke this is an exhortation. He is stirring us up with words like, “Let us do ...”

(Verse 1) Christians don't be content to live on milk! Progress beyond it. Don't be content to stay in Kindergarten. Progress beyond it. So he says, that we now should leave the fundamental principles The elementary doctrine of Christ. Let us go on to maturity.

We should clarify the meaning of the word 'leave' in this verse. In the 'good old days' of the compulsory education experiment – the 1950's, say. You were once drilled – within an inch of your life – in learning multiplication tables. And those of you that were at school then still know them and can use them without hesitation. But you moved on from that level of mathematics and built on them to develop a more mature ability. You left the 'days of sweating over tables': but they were not forgotten, they were part of you. This is the 'leaving' of fundamentals that is meant in this verse.

6:1 Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity,

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May it please God that all present, through Jesus Christ, shall have life through His Name.

A Rebuke and an Exhortation – Pt 2

per S Olyott

The first part of this passage was a rebuke. The Spirit inspired writer of the letter to the Hebrews, takes 'to task' the members of the Church, who are tiring of Christianity and contemplating returning to their former state – in this case, the Jewish religion. He wants to revive them in the Faith, by exhorting them to deeper reliance on God's Word and to fervent prayer to the Apostle and High Priest of their Profession, Jesus Christ. To constantly focus their attention on the Word and Christ – the Living Word. His rebuke in verses 11-14 centres on the fact that they have been so casual in their previous attention to these matters that they are still 'babes', only able to take milk and not the meat of mature Christian learning and experience.

The writer, expresses regret that at present, he cannot explain important things to them, because they are not yet capable of understanding them.

So from verse 6:1, while wishing to pass on from the 'elementary' and fundamental understanding of the Faith – not to overlook or forget it, but to retain and develop from it – he briefly, reiterates these fundamental beliefs:

In the latter part of verse 1 and then verse 2 he mentions six Doctrines – in 3 pairs:

- Repentance and Faith – having to do with Salvation;
- Baptisms and 'laying on of hands' – having to do with ordinances; and
- Resurrection and eternal judgement – the 'final state'.

The person who understands those six doctrines is a 'babe' living on the milk. To progress a person needs to develop with and beyond them. We must remember the strong thread throughout this letter, is that to persevere the Christian must progress and not remain static. To remain static is the first step to turning back and this leads to destruction – Apostasy.

Unfortunately some don't even have the milk – they are about to die of malnutrition. As children they are still in the 'play group' not having even reached kindergarten.

However the immature Christian at least has a grasp of these fundamentals. Do you?

These fundamentals are the foundation of the Christian Life, but if not built on – then anything else he tries to build – is certain to collapse.

Verse 1b: The first two fundamentals:

*... not laying again a foundation of **repentance from dead works and of faith towards God**,*

Question. Are you clear as to how the Christian Life begins?

Does the Christian Life begin by asking the Lord Jesus Christ into your heart? There is no objection to this particular phraseology, but it's not very Biblical.

The Christian Life begins with *repentance from dead works and faith toward God*.

Are you clear that that is the way the Christian Life begins? It doesn't begin with Church going, with Christian upbringing: it begins with repentance from dead works and faith toward God. The person sees himself as he is. Sees that his works are totally unavailing and unimpressive in God's sight. He loathes himself for what he is and he 'turns'. He 'turns' to God. He has faith toward God. What God has done in Christ. Faith in God's promise in Christ. Repentance and faith! That's how the Christian Life begins.

The 'babe' in Christ at least understands that!

Look now at the last two: (end of verse 2) ... ***resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement.***

Are you clear where the Christian Life leads? Where are we going?

We are going to the resurrection of the dead. That's the end of our earthly journey.

AND eternal judgement!

Do you know what resurrection is? Do you know what the Scriptures teach about the great 'hope' of resurrection: how your soul will be with Christ immediately you die; your body is still redeemed by Him although it rots and perishes in the grave; at last to be snatched from there and changed into the 'likeness of Christ'; body and soul to be reunited together. So that as body and soul together you will enjoy God to all eternity in the bliss of heaven – God's eternal 'rest'.

But there is a judgement on which eternal issues reside.

After the universal resurrection, we face the judgement and if we hadn't already been acquitted, because of what our Lord Jesus Christ had done for us, it would 'all be up' with us.

But God – a just God and true – sees that the life we could never live, Christ lived; the death we deserved to die, Christ died so that at that eternal judgement we are acquitted and welcomed to eternal glory. So the Christian Life begins with repentance and faith and leads to resurrection and acquittal at judgement.

The 'babe' In Christ at least understands that much!

Now the middle pair: **baptisms** (cleansing rites) and **laying on of hands**.

There has been considerable debate about what this means. Here are two approaches:

- Some believe that these words should be in brackets. When the Apostle is talking about repentance and Faith, he says that you Hebrews will know about these things because they have been prefigured in the Old Testament with the Jewish washings and the laying on of hands. **Repentance** is signified in the Old Testament by all those washings by which the people were cleansed – but now

it is our hearts that are cleansed – when we repent. **Faith** is signified in the Old Testament when people laid their hands on the sacrifice and accounted that that sacrifice was dying for them. But today we do it by faith – we lay our hands on the Lord Jesus Christ, as it were, by Faith and account that He died for us. Alternatively:

- The Apostle is asking, “How does the Christian Life begin?”
“We know! Every 'babe' in Christ knows that!”
“Where does it lead?”
“Resurrection, eternity, the Judgement!. Every 'babe' in Christ understands that.”

So now he tells us in between, the context of how the Christian Life is lived between its beginning and its finality.

In the 'body of Christ', the true Christian Church, we are ever so varied in so many ways – unique in all the world in our diversity. How can we possibly all be one? Because we have had a **uniting experience**:

1 Corinthians 12 verse 13. ¹³ *For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves[1] or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*
[1. Or servants; Greek bondservants]

It is the baptism of the Holy Spirit which is the uniting experience. It is an error to say that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is something after conversion. It is the uniting experience that makes the church, the Church. When people have had the uniting experience they may show the world and the Church that they have had it through the sign and seal of water baptism. One Lord, one Faith one Baptism. In this case the water baptism is the outward and visible symbol of the Spirit Baptism.¹² In all cases (with or without water Baptism) conversion and Spirit Baptism, both the work of the Spirit, **occur together**. If the baptism of the Spirit were to be subsequent to conversion, then we would need to say “One Lord, one Faith and TWO Baptisms.

We live our Christian Life from the beginning to its ending in the context of the 'body of Christ', where the uniting experience is the Baptism of the Spirit.

The laying on of hands:¹³ In the New Testament some people had hands laid on them, immediately at the point of their conversion, but they were few. In the growing New Testament church this action gathered a new and **lasting**, higher significance. The Apostles were over worked in Jerusalem. Deacons are chosen – hands are laid on them – so that the Apostles can get on with their Ministry. The administrative tasks of the Church are thus handled by others. Here we find Paul and Barnabas preaching through the early world. As soon as they have gathered converts and there is any spiritual maturity amongst them, they gather the Church together and Elders are appointed – hands, are laid on them.

12 In infant Covenant Baptism the anticipated work of the Spirit in conversion (as the child comes to an age of competence) coincides with this eventual Spirit Baptism, confirming the sign and promise of seal set at that water baptism.

13 The Book of Common Order of the Presbyterian Church of Australia in some of its Service Orders involves the laying o of hands, principally in the Ordination/Induction of Ministers and Elders.

So in Churches there is proper, orderly and structured oversight.

People in Churches began their Christian Life with repentance and faith and they marched happily to the resurrection and faced the eternal judgement, unafraid, but the context of the way the Christian Life is to be lived, is the context of a body of people having a uniting experience and who live under a Godly oversight. It is in the framework of the life and witness and total fully-orbed(1) Ministry of the local church that they made their Christian progress.

'Babes' in Christ understand that!

Don't be content to stay in the basic class, take the knowledge of the fundamentals and build upon it. *¹Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity,*

That's what this whole exhortation is about.

As a Christian you're not to be content to be a doctrinal novice. Some Christians are content, just to know the basic truths: you're forbidden by the Word of God to be content with that! Don't be content to know only a little. "Understand more, and in that way," says the Apostle, "go on to maturity."

Look at it like this: here is the man whose heart is completely obedient to God but he only knows a little; another man, whose heart is completely obedient to God, but he knows a lot. The first person won't be a patch' on the second. The first will be obedient in all that he knows, but that's not much. The second will be obedient in all he knows and that is a great deal.

The way to Christian maturity is the way of the mind! The way of the understanding¹⁴. It's by knowing – that you grow.

This point of view is very different from what is being taught in many evangelical Churches today. It's even different from what is being taught in many 'reformed' Churches.

The idea is spreading that you can make progress in the Christian Life and bypass the mind in doing so – completely. That you can become a strong Christian without your mind being involved very much at all.

The Apostle is saying the exact opposite!

It's by having a growing understanding, that you make progress. But many modern

¹⁴ In Creation God created the animals, but he created man in His own image. One of our great differences with animals is that we can know and understand. This ability is given for a reason and we should use it in the most important purpose that we have to know, obey and enjoy God, now and in eternity.

teachers, teach this: it's by something, 'happening' to you that you make progress.¹⁵

This governs their whole outlook.¹⁶

We should dissociate ourselves from that type of expectation and a desire to emulate it. "Happenings' *per se* are not anathema, but to think that a meeting is a great meeting, or to think that I am making significant progress in the Christian Life on the ground of phenomena is a complete contradiction of what the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is saying here.

The preacher who believes in 'happenings', as he comes to preach: the thing he wants most that day is that something dramatic will happen in Church. Rather than desiring that, as many as are properly, prepared and motivated, will be edified. That the aim of developing maturity will be furthered during that Service. That people's minds will be stretched, by divine truth and that by the end of the Service that they will understand more, so that they will understand the implications of divine truth right now and continue to mature in their Christian lives.

The question to ask: to determine if I am making progress in the Christian Life is: "Do I today, have a greater understanding of God's Word and ways than yesterday?"

So the Apostle has said from 6:1 that we are not to be content to go over and over the fundamentals. Go beyond that to maturity. And we will if God permits.

What a challenging passage. I've got to go on and on and be saved or go back and be lost. I can only know if I'm going on by asking the question; "Do I have a growing understanding of God's Word? Do you have a growing understanding of God's Word? If not what are you going to do about it?"

Perhaps you might jot down a list of all the possible ways by which you can increase your understanding of God's Word. Choose the one that appears to you to be the one that is particularly important and put that into operation TODAY. Let us go onto maturity and perfection. ³*And this we will do if God permits.*

[2120]

May it please God that all present, through Jesus Christ, shall have life through His Name.

15 We are not referring to the work of the holy Spirit in bringing about the 'new birth' and justifying the sinner through the finished work of Christ. That is THE happening! But we now are referring to the process of growth towards perfection – sanctification. A life long journey that is only brought to perfection at our death and resurrection into the 'body' of Christ.

16 Here is an example: A preacher comes in to preach. He preaches a 'real royal George' sermon, filled with life and vigour and great truth, but there is no 'happening'. No body bursts into tears. Nobody falls prostrate in the aisle. They only sing the hymns once. There's no euphoria. And in this modern understanding people would go out of the Church disappointed! Even though it may have been the greatest sermon preached in the world: filled with great truth. There was no 'happening', therefore they think that it wasn't a particularly significant meeting..

However another preacher comes. He preaches a vastly inferior sermon. It contains nothing worthwhile in it, but while he preaches, somebody begins to cry. Somebody falls down in the aisle. And they sing the third hymn over and over again as though they can never stop! There's a great euphoria and excitement. Everybody goes out of the Church saying: "A great meeting!"

1) Here we reach the highwater mark of present day anti-theistic thought. Our opponents maintain not only that they do not know anything about the nature of reality but that nobody else can possibly know anything about it. The

present day scientist is often not the humble seeker after truth but the militant preacher of a faith, and the faith that he preaches is the faith of agnosticism. It is this point to which we have seen all things come. The face of science and philosophy today is, with rare exceptions, set squarely against Christianity and the Theism that serves it as a foundation.

We are driven to a defense of our faith. The full-orbed life, that which the world has sought in vain, is in our possession. We have an absolute God in whose fellowship we have even now the full-orbed life. We have an absolute God who alone can give meaning to all our strivings for advancement. We have an absolute God who alone can guarantee that that which we have in principle now will be fully realized hereafter.

Cornelius Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education: The Full-Orbed Life*.

A Terrifying Warning

per S Olyott

Please refer to these very solemn verses in God's word, which must be described as a 'Terrifying Warning'. Hebrews 6:4-8. Perhaps no other verses in the Bible are as frightening as these. Yet we are reminded that: *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,* 2 Timothy 3:16.

The Hebrews you will remember, were Christians – they were Jews, but they had become Christians – and they were thinking of going back to their Judaism. The writer of the letter is writing specifically to people who have the thought: “Let me go back to what I was before.”

He's spent a good deal of time already warning them, that if they do not go on, and on, and on ... in the Christian Life, then they are going to be lost. He's already warned them that if we turn our back on the 'light of God's Glory', as seen in the face of Jesus Christ, the only alternative is 'outer darkness'.

There are only two ways in which a person who professes to be a Christian can go. He can only go on or go out! There is no in between.

So in the first 5 Chapters, in no uncertain terms, he has warned them of the peril of Apostasy. No doubt hearts have been searched several times during this.

Fortunately he's also told them (and us) two other things: He's told them what is the secret for progressing in the Christian Life. He hasn't just warned them about going back. He's told them how to go on. The secret is two fold: first of all I must continue to expose my heart and mind to God's Word. (You might ask yourself, right now – how have you got on in doing this since last time?); secondly what I must do, is to keep my eyes fixed on my Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom I can keep coming for mercy every time I fail and for grace to help in time of need.

As I expose my heart to God's Word and as I approach my God through the glorious High Priest and Mediator, that is how I make progress in the Christian Life.

Then there is something else he has told them: He's given them a measure, by which they can see if they are making progress in the Christian Life. We saw that last week.

To find if you are making progress you simply have to ask one question: Do I have a growing understanding of God's Word? Not just knowledge of what the Word of God says, but an understanding of what it says to me and what the implications are – each

and every day I live.

That is the measure: are there things I couldn't grasp years ago, which I grasp fairly easily now? Have I progressed from 'milk' to 'meat'? Are there things that needed to be taught to me, that I am now in a position to teach to others?

Let's not just go over and over the 'basics' of the Christian Life for ever more, let's build on that stage and go on to 'maturity'. **This we will do if God permits!**

With that note ringing in their minds he then comes to these terrifying verses.¹⁷

There are four things to say:

- To understand this passage, keep in your mind, the parable of the sower.¹⁸ Our Lord told that parable and made it plain that it is a key, that unlocks the meaning of all the parables. (Our Lord's whole ministry is the key that unlocks the whole of the Bible.)
The parable is about the different responses the Word of God meets.
The sower sows the seed;
 - Immediately, in the first group of people's lives, the 'birds come and peck' the seed away – some people, when they hear the Word of God, it has no effect on them at all. Satan comes immediately and takes the Word away.
 - Here are other people, when they hear the Word, it puts down roots and grows. Up it comes very quickly, but there is no depth of soil – the promise is superficial. When the sun shines it withers. No reserve of moisture. So it is gone as quickly as it came. When they hear the Word of God they greet it with gladness and enthusiasm, but when they learn that there is a cost to be paid for professing to be a Christian they wither away – they go away as quickly as they came.

But then there are two other cases. These are the ones of interest today.

- There are those who hear the Word. The 'plant' begins to grow roots and there's the shoot. It looks very strong and promising. There's nothing wrong with it. Weeks and months go by and everyone is very encouraged. This 'seed' hasn't been pecked away; it hasn't withered away. It all starts out to be wonderful.
But there is something else growing there at the same time. Gradually that other growth strangles the life out of the emerging plant. So, at the very moment when it looks like it's about to burst into fruit – it never gets there!

The cares of the world have become bigger than their Christian profession.

¹⁷ Hebrews 6:4-8. ⁴For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. ⁷For 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. ⁸But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

¹⁸ Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20, and Luke 8:4-15

Their desire for other things becomes more important. The deceitfulness of riches, robs them of their spiritual life. They deliberately opt for something else when the 'final crunch' comes.

- But then there is the fourth sort. They hear the Word, and the Word grows and at last they bear 'fruit'. Some only 30-fold – but it's the fruit of the Spirit and it is evident. There's that changed character. Some others, 60-fold – the Christ-likeness is even more evident. Even more change in the character. Then – thank God – some 100-fold.

We have to keep that parable in our mind, as we come to Hebrews Chapter 6, verses 4-8. In particular the third and fourth responses to the Word. Because in verse 7 we read of rain coming down; a useful crop coming up. The 'seed' was planted with a purpose and the planter receives that purposed, 'fruit'. But in verse 8, we read of the rain coming down but all that is growing at the end of the season is thorns and thistles. So there is a clear parallel between verses 4-8 of Hebrews to the parable of the sower.

- The second thing that needs to be said, is this: That for a considerable period, the third sort and the fourth sort in the parable look identical. For a considerable period they are indistinguishable. Neither is burdened by the 'pecking of birds'; the 'shallowness of soil'; or the fickleness of 'rapid growth'. Has the 'sun come out to wither them? No. We see for both: first the shoot; then the stalk; the start of the ear of corn. Only after all of this do they begin to appear to be different.

Back to Hebrews Chapter 6. Verses 4 & 5.

- Here is 'Tom' (of tripartite fame¹⁹) in verse 4 he has been enlightened. He's had a definite 'experience' – once – by which he sees the truth of the Gospel. He's tasted the heavenly gift. He knows some of the benefits and blessings of the Gospel. He's been made a partaker of the Holy Spirit. He's had a real experience of God. Verse 5: He's tasted the good Word of God – he's bought himself a Bible and he reads it. He relishes and revels in it. He's even tasted of the powers of the world to come. The reality of eternal, invisible things, has gripped him. 'Tom' is a real believer, as we shall see. The 5 phrases used to describe him (verses 4 & 5) are an accurate description for him.

Here is 'Dick' – he's been enlightened. He's had a definite experience, once, that the Gospel is true. He's tasted the heavenly gift. He knows something of the benefits and blessings of the Gospel. He really does. He's a partaker of the Holy Spirit – he's had a real experience of God. Tasted the good Word of God. He too has bought himself a Bible – reading and devouring it's knowledge. He thinks that it is good. He too has tasted of the powers of the world to come. His whole being is gripped by the reality of the eternal, invisible realm.

But. Not known to us at the moment, as we currently look at him, he is going

to apostatise and be lost.

The words used can also describe him, because the parable of the sower makes clear that for a considerable period (in the words of Our Lord: “for a time”). The third and fourth responses to the Word of God in the parable are indistinguishable for a considerable time. Both the growing stalks can be described in identical terms even to the very point of the developing of ear of corn.

- The third thing to be said is this:

They become distinguishable eventually. How?

One goes on and bears fruit – 30, 60, 100. The other gets to the very point where you think there is going to be a permanent change, but it's at that point that the life is strangled out of him. That piece of ground returns to being barren. The ears were beginning to form. But here are the thorns and the thistles beginning to strangle. That plant becomes nothing but the other goes on and on ... becoming 30, 60, or 100. And as the Lord says, “It increases”.

So, there was 'Dick'

He knows the Gospel is true. He's tasted the heavenly gift. Yes he has! Just as Peter says, in 2 Peter 2:20, “... they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,” He has been a partaker of the Holy Spirit. Really had an experience of God. Just as much as those who came out of Egypt – had an experience of God: yet perished in the wilderness and never came to God's promised 'rest'. He has shown all the early signs.

But beside all that they are – other things are growing in his life. Which eventually take over and strangle the Word. Instead of exposing himself to the Word of God, his interest is beginning to wane. Instead of having a growing understanding, he's standing still. The things that were difficult for him he never learns to grasp. Despite everything that he knows, he opts for the other things: The cares of this world: bigger to him than his faith in Christ. Deceitfulness of riches: an attraction in being well off, which is more attractive to him than the Son of God. Many things that take over.

So as a deliberate act he opts for these other things and his spiritual life falls away. 'Falling away' is a deliberate act. If he opts for these other things, his spiritual life will wither away. They are the 'thorns and thistles' which will strangle and choke it.

He knows who the Lord Jesus Christ is and he knows what the Lord Jesus Christ has done. But he's taken his eyes off Him. He's done what is described in verse 6, ⁶... *crucifying once again the Son of God* When they crucified Christ they treated Him like an impostor. This is what 'Dick' is doing. ...

But, here is 'Tom'. He's experienced all the things we mentioned before: and above all he doesn't fall away. He goes on. Continuing to expose himself to the Word of God and to 'lay hold' of the Lord Jesus Christ as his great High Priest. Through constant use he becomes skilled in the word of righteousness. He

proceeds from the 'milk' to the 'meat'. From being taught to being a teacher. He continues to look to Christ. Comes to Christ: when he falls he comes to Him for mercy. When he is weak he comes to Him for grace to help in time of need. He grows in knowledge and grace.

Christian character is being formed! His character is transformed. First a little then more and more. Now you see someone who has holiness as a characteristic of his life. So it is with 'Tom'.

He (in verse 7) is rather like a field: the rain falls on it. The rain is God's Word. The rain is God's Spirit. God looks on this life for fruit. The fruit that pleases God. The fruit that God sent His word to bear.

This fruit, which pleases God is seen in 'Tom's' life. So he receives a blessing from God. He's in God's favour.

Such a person is proving that he has a new nature, that he is the 'genuine article'.

“And despite everything to the contrary,” says the Apostle, in verse 9, “I am nevertheless convinced that you Hebrews are in that category.”

[2197]

May it please God that all present, through Jesus Christ, shall have life through His Name.

This Do in Remembrance of Me

Imagine if our Lord Jesus, on the night before His arrest and crucifixion, had gathered His closest disciples and shown them a worship practice by which they were to remember Him after He was gone. This ordinance would also serve to promote a spiritual bond among the believers and enshrine the meaning of the death Jesus was about to endure. We can only imagine how significant these instructions would be to the disciples in the years to come and how important a role this worship practice would play in the life of the church.

Those familiar with the Gospel accounts will realise that this is not a hypothetical situation. Jesus did, in fact, establish a sacred worship practice – a sacrament – that would centre the Christian faith upon His atoning death and unite the believers in their communion with Him during all the long years between His death and His second coming. ... This sacrament, the Lord's Supper, has indeed occupied a central role in the faith and practice of the church.²⁰

Many believers, especially in contemporary evangelical Christianity, have confused ideas about this sacrament, being largely ignorant of the theology poured into and out from it. Thus they risk failing to derive assurance and comfort nor seek grace from participating in it.

There are possibly two explanations for the confusion. However both are poor excuses:

- The spectre of Roman Catholicism, with its mysticism and ritualistic devotion to the Mass is one. Causing evangelicals to define themselves in opposition to Rome rather than in conformity to the Bible.
- Alternatively, at the other extreme, is the evangelicals' devotion to the Bible as the principal **means of grace**. Our proper emphasis on believing Bible truth, coupled to an over emphasis on evangelism at the expense of the means for Christian growth (discipleship), produces a coolness towards the Bible's advocacy for sacramental grace.

The challenge set before today's evangelicals, and especially those who embrace Reformed Theology, is that we should give the Lord's Supper the place intended for it by our Lord. This will mean still affirming a primacy in our ministry of the Word of God, as demonstrated in the practice of the Apostles. But it also means restoring to our worship and our approach to spiritual growth a grateful and believing partaking of the Supper of our Lord.²¹

The means of Grace:

Having asserted that the Word is the principal means of grace, whereby we receive the gift of spiritual life, by the Spirit, through the Word, and are sanctified and equipped for

²⁰ Phillips, Richard D. *What is the Lord's Supper?* Basics of the Reformed Faith Series, page 5

²¹ Ibid., page 6

service through the Word, do we really need any other means to strengthen, encourage and establish us in the faith? If the Word can perform all these functions, what use is there for any other means of grace? If we are able to place confidence in the power of the Word (by the Spirit) to change lives and to equip for us for evangelism, is there a need for the sacraments in addition?

The answer can depend on the approach taken to the question.

Throughout the course of Christian history and by a survey of current practices it is found that there many different approaches. The answer depends on the approach that is used.

- **Mysticism:** No relevance or place for the sacraments (together with a diminishing of the importance of the Word) is inherent here. Proponents of this approach, throughout the ages and particularly today, have argued that the **ONLY** means of grace is the internal (without the Word) operation of the Spirit upon the souls of believers. They believe that God gives immediate knowledge of Himself directly to the soul by the Spirit. The extreme of this approach is seen in the Quakers.
- **Roman Catholic:** Although 'mystic' or superstitious, in some of their practices, this tradition holds almost the reverse position from the category above, in that they recognise only one true communion through which grace is dispensed, namely the body of Christ which is the church. Further, only a priest of this church is able to mediate the blessings that are specifically conveyed in the sacraments of baptism and the Mass. (and the additional 5 sacraments that they include). They believe that we receive grace in a more or less mechanical manner through the sacraments (*ex opere operato, i.e. -through the act performed*).
- **Rationalistic Christians:** Some Christians, especially within the evangelical community have come to the view that there is no other means of grace apart from the written and preached word of God (made effective by the Spirit of God working in the 'heart' of the believing Christian). They believe that the Bible alone, whether it is read, spoken, or preached, is the only true means of grace. Some acknowledge the two ordinances as merely commemorative and only serve a memorial function, where we simply call to mind the benefits that Christ has brought to us.
- **The Reformed View:** However there is another view that developed at the time of the Reformation: that the sacraments were more than mere symbols. In addition to fulfilling a representative function by signifying grace, they also 'seal' grace to the believer. As with the *type* ,of circumcision, in the Old Testament, foreshadowing the sacraments of the New, they are a *sign* and *seal*. (Romans 4:11) A *sign* that the believer belongs to the company of faith, the church, and a *seal* (or guarantee) of God's grace that is appropriated by His gift of faith. The reformers, at least those who were followers of Calvin and the Continental Reformers, believe that Christians receive grace through the ministry of the Word of God and the application of that Word of God by the Holy Spirit, and through the sacraments. And that the sacraments can never be divorced from the Word of God. The bare *sign* itself must always be accompanied by the Word of God.

This explains why Protestant ministers are often referred to as 'ministers of the Word and sacrament' and why Reformed churches insist that the sacraments should almost always be administered in the context of a normal service of worship where the Word of God is proclaimed and also serves to interpret the meaning of the sacraments when they are being administered.²²

What benefit does the communicant receive through the Lord's Supper?

Considering the physical example which is used by God to dispense His grace: we can see that the elements of bread (food) and 'wine' (drink) support and maintain the physical body. The body already exists but it requires these to continue to live and prosper. This we readily understand. In God's wisdom He reminds us as we eat and drink these elements of this process.

However, as with Christ's physical acts of mercy with the people He met, such as the man born physically blind, He used the physical to teach a spiritual meaning. The blind man not only received physical sight but also spiritual discernment. In the case of the Lord's Supper the spiritual outcome is that we are directed through the physical analogy to recognise, remember, celebrate and be thankful for the support and maintenance of our new existence (new birth) in Christ brought about by His 'broken body' – signified by the bread, and His 'spilt blood' – signified by the wine. It is by the continual application of Christ's finished work and sacrifice that our spiritual existence continues and prospers. The Lord's Supper is such a means of grace, especially when conducted in the context of and with the understanding brought about by the Word of God.

What the communicant 'feeds on' then is not the body of Christ as such, but the sanctifying benefits that He offers through His atoning death.

Christ's body is not physically present in any way (by, in, under or over the bread and wine), but as He explained to the disciples (John 16:7) *Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.*

It is the Spirit of Christ that is in us as we 'communicate' with Him and each other (as His 'body' the Church), during our celebration of the Lord's Supper.

The Confession teaches that the conception of saving faith is not the work of the sacraments: (14:1) *The grace of faith by which the chosen are empowered to believe for their salvation, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is normally produced by the service of the Word. By this and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it (the grace of Faith) is increased and strengthened.* For our spiritual nurture and our proper Christian growth.

Above all the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is an ordinance: that is it is a command of Christ. "Do this in remembrance of me." – until He comes.

[1497]

May this belief be so for all the saints gathered here today.