

CHRISTOLOGY AND THE CONCEPT OF FAITH IN HEBREWS 5:11–6:20

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I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years some scholars have proposed that faith in Hebrews does not have Jesus as its object. For example, Erich Grässer points out that, although Paul's concept of faith has an unbreakable relationship with the salvation event (i.e. faith in Christ), faith in Hebrews is not directed to Christ in any way. He believes that faith in Hebrews is transformed from a soteriological, personal reference into an ethical category of steadfastness.¹ Grässer's basic motive for advocating the de-Christologized ethical view lies in his understanding of eschatology in Hebrews. He argues that the eschatological paradox of "already" and "not yet" is dissolved into the purely temporal scheme of indefinite time in the future. The remaining time (ἐπίλοιπος χρόνος) before Christ's coming is considered the period for the testing of faith.² Because of the delay of the parousia "the existential meaning of faith, characteristic of an earlier period, yields, as time goes by, to the treatment of faith as a virtue appropriate to a situation where the parousia is no longer expected soon."³

Grässer's ethical view of faith in Hebrews is also evident in his interpretation of 5:11–6:20. He asserts that the term σπουδή in 6:11 has an ethical sense of "earnest striving" or "being eager." He considers that σπουδή has become an irrevocable Christian command. Grässer also understands πίστις καὶ μακροθυμία in 6:12 as hendiadys, namely, faith which is patience.⁴ He believes that the two terms should not be considered as the mode of acquiring salvation, but as steadfastness.⁵ For this reason Grässer contends that faith in Hebrews has no specific Christological element, namely, that Jesus is not the object of faith.⁶

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¹ Erich Grässer, *Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1965) 63, 65–66, 79. Other scholars who hold to an ethical view of faith are: Barnabas Lindars, *New Testament Theology: The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 108; Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 313.

² *Ibid.* 171.

³ C. F. D. Moule, "Review of Grässer, *Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief*," *JTS n.s.* 17 (1966) 148.

⁴ The term hendiadys is defined as the coordination of two ideas by καὶ, in which one is dependent on the other. In the NT this device is used to avoid a series of dependent genitives. See BDF 228 (§442).

⁵ Grässer, *Glaube im Hebräerbrief* 28.

⁶ *Ibid.* 35.

In response to Grässer, Hamm argues that faith in Hebrews is profoundly Christological, in that Jesus is presented as a model and enabler of Christian faith.⁷ He even mentions that Jesus may be portrayed as the object of faith in some ways, although he does not provide evidence for this contention.⁸ It is my conviction that the idea of Jesus being the object of faith is evident in the implicit logic of the epistle, even though it is not expressed in terms of “faith in Christ.”⁹ The purpose of this paper is to bring forth the Christological orientation of faith in Hebrews. More specifically, I will demonstrate through a careful exegesis of Heb 5:11–6:20 that the author of Hebrews depicts Jesus as both the object and model of faith for believers.

II. JESUS AS THE OBJECT OF FAITH

What are the proofs which may indicate that Jesus is portrayed as the object of faith? The author’s Christological aspect of faith may be demonstrated from the following three different aspects: (1) from the meaning of the phrase “the beginning principles about God’s oracles” (τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ); (2) from the warning passage; (3) from the relationship of faith to the word of God.

1. *Meaning of “the beginning principles about God’s oracles.”* First of all, the Christological reference to faith in 5:11–6:20 can be observed from the phrase “the beginning principles about God’s oracles” (τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ) in 5:12.¹⁰ The context suggests that the term στοιχεῖον has the meaning of “fundamental principles” or “letters of the alphabet” (i.e. ABC’s).¹¹ In other words, with the use of στοιχεῖον the author of Hebrews has in mind the fundamental Christian doctrines which they received when they first believed. This is supported by the use of ἀρχή (beginning) in Hebrews. For example, in 3:14, he uses ἀρχὴν τῆς ὑποστάσεως (the beginning of the confidence) to refer to the confidence or trust which the recipients began when they first became Christians.¹² More specifically, in 6:1 the author uses ἀρχή to refer to the fundamental doctrines concerning Christ. Thus it is clear that τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ (the beginning principles about God’s oracles) in 5:12 is equivalent to the phrase τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον (the beginning teaching about Christ) in 6:1.¹³

⁷ Dennis Hamm, “Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Jesus Factor,” *CBQ* 52 (1990) 272.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See also Buist M. Fanning, “A Theology of Hebrews,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (ed. Roy B. Zuck and D. Bock; Chicago: Moody, 1994) 412.

¹⁰ The genitive τοῦ θεοῦ in 5:12 needs to be taken as the objective genitive (i.e. the oracles about God) because the author of Hebrews speaks of the oracles which God has already spoken through his messengers.

¹¹ BAGD 501.

¹² P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 152.

¹³ It seems to be appropriate to understand the genitive τοῦ Χριστοῦ in 6:1 as the objective genitive (i.e. the word about Christ) rather than the subjective genitive (i.e. the word which Christ spoke) because the author of Hebrews refers to the message which was spoken through the Lord (Heb 2:3). For the view that takes the phrase as the subjective genitive see J. C. Adams, “Exegesis of Hebrews vi.1f.,” *NTS* 13 (1967) 382.

The immediate context also supports the idea that both phrases are identical. The phrase “the beginning principles of the oracles of God” is related to milk (γάλακτος) in 5:12b, both of which belong to the spiritual infant (5:13). On the other hand, in 5:14 the author indicates that solid food belongs to the mature. Based on this analogy, the readers are exhorted to move on to maturity by leaving the elementary doctrine of Christ (τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον) in 6:1. Apparently, Christian maturity is contrasted with the elementary doctrine of Christ in 6:1. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the phrases “the beginning principles of the word of God” in 5:12 and “the beginning teaching about Christ” in 6:1 are synonymous to each other in meaning.

Then what is the content of the elementary doctrine of Christ? The grammatical construction of 6:1 suggests that the six elements described in 6:1b–2 are further descriptions of the elementary doctrine of Christ mentioned in 6:1a. It is to be noted that the main verb φερώμεθα (let us move on) in 6:1 is accompanied by two adverbial participles, ἀφέντες (leaving) and καταβαλλόμενοι (laying down). These two participles are parallel in thought. In other words, the expression “not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith upon God, teaching on baptisms and laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment” is a further description of the phrase “having left the elementary doctrine of Christ” in 6:1a.¹⁴

It is true that the author of Hebrews does not express faith in terms of “faith in Christ” or “believing in Jesus.” However, this does not necessarily mean that 6:1b–2 has no reference to Christ. The discussion of the phrases “the beginning principles about the word of God” (τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ) and “the beginning teaching about Christ” (τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον) in this section clearly demonstrates that they refer to the fundamental doctrines of Christ which the readers received when they were first introduced to Christianity. In this sense it may be said that Christ is construed as the object and the content of Christian faith in Hebrews even if the author does not use the phrase “faith in Christ.”

2. *Warning passage (6:4–8).* Next, the Christological reference to faith in 5:11–6:20 can also be detected from the warning passage in 6:4–8. In order to determine the relationship between faith and Christology, a detailed exegesis of 6:4–8 is necessary. To begin with, the complex sentence structure of 6:4–6 can be visualized as follows:¹⁵

6:4 Ἀδύνατον γὰρ τοὺς ἅπαξ (1) φωτισθέντας (those who have been
(For it is impossible) enlightened once),

¹⁴ For a different view see Adams, “Exegesis of Hebrews vi.1 f.” 379–80. Adams argues that the six items mentioned in 6:1b–2 do not have any reference to Christianity, but they are part of the faith of a Jew. The reason is that there is no reference to phrases such as “faith in Christ” or “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.” He asserts that the author’s use of “faith in God” in 6:1 is the proof that it is the faith held commonly by Jews, and not by Christians.

¹⁵ My own translation of this passage is provided for a better understanding of the text. I have intentionally used redundant phrases with an attempt to bring out the author’s intent.

	(2) γευσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου (and those who have tasted of the heavenly gift)
	καὶ
	(3) μετόχους γενηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου (and those who have become partakers of the Holy Spirit)
6:5	καὶ
	(4) καλὸν γευσαμένους θεοῦ ῥῆμα δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος (and those who have tasted good word of God and the powers of age to come)
6:6	καὶ
	(5) παραπεσόντας (and those who have fallen away),
	(6) ἀνασταυροῦντας ἑαυτοῖς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ (because they crucify again the son of God against themselves)
	καὶ
	(7) παραδειγματίζοντας (and because they publicly put [him] to shame).

πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν (to renew again to repentance [i.e. those who are mentioned above]),

The above structural layout reveals that ἀνακαινίζειν in v. 6 functions as an exegetical infinitive to the adjective Ἀδύνατον (i.e. “it is impossible to renew”). The participles in (1) through (5) ought to be classified as substantival participles because they are introduced by the article τοῦς and connected to each other by a simple connective series, τε . . . καὶ . . . καὶ . . . καί.¹⁶ Some English translations regard παραπεσόντας (having fallen away) in (5) as an adverbial participle, rendering it as a conditional sentence.¹⁷ However, the above structure clearly shows that the fifth participle is also governed by the article τοῦς, and therefore it should be taken as a substantival participle. These participles, as accusatives, function as direct objects of the infinitive ἀνακαινίζειν (to renew). As for the participles in (6) and (7), they are to be categorized as adverbial participles, both expressing the cause for the impossibility of renewing to repentance.

Then what evidence does the author provide in 6:4–8 which may support the idea that Jesus is considered the object of faith in Hebrews? A careful examination of this passage indicates that the warning against the apostates

¹⁶ J. A. Sproule, “Παραπεσόντας in Hebrews 6:6,” *Grace Theological Journal* 2 (1981) 328.

¹⁷ NIV translates v. 6, “if they fall away.” RSV translates it, “if they then commit apostasy.” On the other hand, NASB and NRSV translate, “and then have fallen away.”

itself points to Jesus as the object of faith. This may be observed from the following aspects: (1) the characteristics of the apostates; (2) the impossibility of repentance by the apostates; and (3) the consequences for the apostates.

a. *The characteristics of the apostates.* The above grammatical analysis shows that those for whom it is impossible to be renewed to repentance have four characteristics.¹⁸ First, according to v. 4, they are the ones who have been enlightened once (*ἅπαξ φωτισθέντας*). Conzelmann suggests that, although not fully developed, the word is used in Hebrews to refer to baptism.¹⁹ Likewise, Käsemann asserts that with the adverb *ἅπαξ* (once) the participle *φωτισθέντας* (having been enlightened) in 6:4 “is related to a concrete action that can only be *Baptism*.”²⁰ However, the use of the term *φωτίζειν* (to enlighten) in Hebrews suggests that it refers to the spiritual enlightenment associated with salvation. In Hebrews the word occurs twice (6:4; 10:32). The reference to “the contest of sufferings” described in 10:32–33 seems to indicate that *φωτίζειν* in 10:32 is more than simply the ritual of baptism; it has to do with the reception of the message of salvation (irrespective of the genuineness of the reception). This is further supported by the phrase “after having received the knowledge of the truth” (10:26).²¹ In other words, “having been enlightened” (10:32) is equated to having received the knowledge of the truth (10:26). Likewise, in 6:4 the use of *φωτίζειν* (to enlighten) along with the idea of “having tasted the heavenly gifts and the good word of God” (6:4, 5) and “having been made partakers of the Holy Spirit” (6:4) suggests that it implies deeper spiritual teachings after an initial enlightenment. Thus it seems clear that the word *φωτίζειν* does not refer to the baptismal ritual, but the reception of the knowledge of salvation.²²

The second characteristic of those who are impossible to be renewed for repentance is described as “having tasted” (*γευσαμένους*) the heavenly gift (6:4) and the good word of God and the world to come (6:5).²³ The word “to taste” (*γεύομαι*) occurs 15 times in the NT (12 times outside Hebrews; 3 times in Hebrews). The usage outside of Hebrews can be divided into two categories. First, the word has the meaning of “experiencing” in a metaphorical sense (e.g. Matt 16:28; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27; John 8:52; 1 Pet 2:3). Second, it is used in a physical sense to refer to “tasting slightly” (e.g. Matt 27:34; John 2:9) or “eating” in the sense of ingesting (Luke 14:24; Acts 10:10; 20:1; 23:14; Col 2:21). In Hebrews the verb *γεύομαι* is used to mean “to taste” in a metaphorical

¹⁸ For the purpose of this discussion I have combined (2) and (4) into one category because the same verb *γεύομαι* is used in both phrases.

¹⁹ Hans Conzelmann, “*φῶς, κτλ.*,” *TDNT* 9:355.

²⁰ Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews* (trans. Roy A. Harrisville and Irving L. Sandberg; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 187.

²¹ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 320.

²² With the expression “the reception of the knowledge of salvation” I am not suggesting that these individuals had a genuine conversion experience. I believe that it is possible for someone to come to the point of receiving the knowledge of salvation without necessarily going through a genuine conversion experience.

²³ I have decided to discuss the characteristics mentioned in vv. 4–5 as one category because *γεύομαι* (to taste) occurs in both verses.

sense. The issue at stake in Heb 6:4–6 is whether the author of Hebrews uses the word “to taste” in the sense of “tasting slightly” or “ingesting fully.” Nicole argues that in 6:4–5 the word refers to taking a small amount of food or drink to determine whether it is suitable.²⁴ He suggests that the term is used in the sense of making a trial or experiment. However, the author’s use of the term seems to imply more than a simple tasting. For example, in 2:9 the author describes that Jesus tasted death for all. This does not mean that Jesus had a near-death experience, but he experienced death in its entirety. Moreover, the spiritual experiences of those who are described in 6:4–6 seem to indicate that the tasting is not a superficial but an authentic one. The author indicates in v. 4 that these individuals have tasted the “heavenly gift” (δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου) which is an image for the salvation bestowed in Christ.²⁵ In addition, in v. 6, they are described as “having tasted the good word of God” (καλὸν γευσάμενους θεοῦ ῥῆμα) and “the power of the age to come” (δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος). The former recalls God’s word, which is so prominent in the first four chapters of Hebrews. The latter recalls the manner in which the message of salvation was confirmed among the readers (2:4).²⁶ The above analysis clearly indicates that γεύομαι in vv. 4–5 does not mean “to eat” (or “to drink”) for the purpose of merely “tasting,” but “to experience to the full.”²⁷ Apparently, the individuals mentioned in these verses have tasted in full the knowledge of salvation which was available to them.²⁸ Thus it may be said that the verb “tasting” signifies an experience that is real and personal.²⁹

The third characteristic of those who are impossible to be renewed for repentance is that they have become partakers of the Holy Spirit (v. 4). Lane suggests that the reference to the Holy Spirit has to do with the heavenly gift (namely, the reality of personal salvation) mentioned earlier.³⁰ However, the conjunctions in vv. 4–6 (τε . . . καὶ . . . καὶ . . . καί) indicate that the descriptions of the individuals in these verses are to be considered different characteristics of the apostates. This means that “partaking of the Holy Spirit” cannot be equated with the “heavenly gift.” These people tasted not only the heavenly gift, but also became partakers of the Holy Spirit.

Then in what sense were they partakers of the Holy Spirit? It appears that the partaking has to do with the distribution of the spiritual gifts. In Heb 2:4 the author indicates that the distribution of the Holy Spirit is one of the ways that God confirmed the message which was spoken by the Lord and by those who heard from him. In other words, the distribution of the

²⁴ R. Nicole, “Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints,” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 360.

²⁵ O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (12th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 242.

²⁶ Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 170.

²⁷ Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 320.

²⁸ The context of Heb 6:4–8 seems to imply that these people willfully rejected salvation in light of the privilege of having tasted the knowledge of salvation in full. This refers to the sin of deliberate rejection of Christ after receiving the knowledge of truth mentioned in Heb 10:26.

²⁹ P. E. Hughes, “Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Peril of Apostasy,” *WTJ* 35 (1972–73) 141.

³⁰ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1991) 141.

Holy Spirit was considered to be the mark of the Christian community.³¹ This leads one to speculate that these individuals were closely associated with the believing community. The expression “partakers of the Holy Spirit” does not necessarily mean that they have received the Holy Spirit as true believers do. They were partakers in a sense that they have witnessed the confirmation of the gospel which was accompanied by the distribution of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the phrase “partakers of the Holy Spirit” may also refer to the benefits they had received from the ministry of the apostles which were accompanied by signs and wonders and various miracles.

The fourth characteristic of those for whom it is impossible to be renewed to repentance is that they have fallen away (*παραπεσόντας*) even though they had such great spiritual blessings (v. 5). The word *παράπιπτο* appears only here in the NT, and therefore it is difficult to ascertain its exact meaning. However, in the Septuagint the word is used to refer to a culpable mistake or sin.³² The verb is used to express an attitude reflecting deliberate rejection of God (Ezek 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 2 Chr 26:18; 28:19; 29:6; 30:7; Wis 6:9; 12:2). This idea seems to carry over in Hebrews and clearly means either to fall away or commit apostasy, which is equivalent to “falling away from the living God” (*ἀποστήναι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ζῶντος*) in 3:12.

The analysis of the characteristics of the apostates indicates that they are the ones who deliberately rebelled against God, and chose not to believe after they had been enlightened by the word of God. Hughes expresses this point well: “it is a sin committed, not in ignorance, but in the face of knowledge and even experience of the truth—not the sin of those who are ‘ignorant and wayward’ (Heb. 5:2) but of those who ‘sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth (10:26).’”³³ These characteristics suggest that the warning in 6:4–8 has a soteriological significance.³⁴

³¹ Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 170.

³² W. Michaelis, “*παράπιπτο*, *παράπτωμα*,” *TDNT* 6:170.

³³ P. E. Hughes, “Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Peril of Apostasy” 148.

³⁴ The issue of whether those who are mentioned in Heb 6:4–6 are genuine believers or not is indeed a difficult matter to resolve. I tend to hold that this passage refers to those individuals who were only professing believers (i.e. those who did not have a genuine conversion experience). It appears that they have been brought to a place of repentance for salvation. They were enlightened by receiving the knowledge of truth. But instead of placing their faith in Christ, they willfully rejected the salvation in Christ (cf. Heb 10:29). If one understands the warning passages in Hebrews this way, then the sin of the apostates may be similar to that of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in the Gospels (i.e. the willful rejection of Jesus as the Messiah [cf. Matt 12:32; Mark 3:29]) and the sins committed by the false prophets in 2 Pet 2:20–22. For the view that it refers to professing believers see P. E. Hughes, “Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Peril of Apostasy” 137–155; Nicole, “Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6” 355–364; Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (1982) 67–80. For the view that it refers to genuine Christians who will lose their reward see J. B. Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six: ‘An Age-Long Battleground’” *BSac* 94 (1937) 321–342; T. K. Oberholtzer, “The Warning Passages in Hebrews. Part 3 (of 5 Parts: The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4–12,” *BSac* 145 (1988) 319–328; Randall C. Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4–8,” *BSac* 155 (1998) 62–91.

b. *The impossibility of repentance by the apostates.* The author points out that, for these apostates, there is no possibility of being restored to repentance (6:6).³⁵ What is the reason for this impossibility? It is explained by two adverbial participles following the infinitive ἀνακαινίζειν (to renew).

The first reason is indicated by the participle ἀνασταυροῦντας. The verb ἀνασταυρόω occurs only here in the NT. In extrabiblical Greek, the prefix ἀνά, when used with the verb σταυρόω, does not mean “again” but “up.” Thus the compound word ἀνασταυρόω simply means “to crucify.”³⁶ For this reason some commentators suggest that the word in Heb 6:6 simply means “to crucify.”³⁷ However, the context seems to indicate that in Heb 6:6 ἀνασταυρόω means “to crucify again.” It is to be noted that the emphasis of 6:1–6 is on the word πάλιν (again). This word is used in 6:1 to warn the readers not to lay the foundation again (πάλιν) of the elementary teaching concerning Christ. In 6:6 the author also indicates that it is impossible for these apostates to be restored again (πάλιν) to repentance. Moreover, the characteristics of the apostates described in 6:4–6 presuppose that they had come to have the knowledge of the crucified Lord. Thus it seems reasonable to understand ἀνασταυρόω as “to crucify again.”

The second reason for the impossibility of renewal for those apostates is expressed by the second participle παραδειγματίζοντας. This verb, which occurs only here in the NT, means “to expose to public obloquy.”³⁸ In other words, the author of Hebrews indicates that the apostates expose the Son of God to public humiliation by rejecting him. Verse 6 implies that those who forsake their faith in Jesus Christ “in reality join forces with those who crucified Christ and brought him into contempt as criminal. Thus apostasy is tantamount to shaming Christ, and therefore brings such serious results.”³⁹ It is clear that the reasons for the impossibility of repentance by the apostates have to do with the rejection of Christ himself. In this sense, faith in Hebrews is as Christological as that of the Synoptic Gospels and the Pauline writings. The author of Hebrews clearly portrays Jesus as the object of faith through unbelief by the apostates.

c. *The consequences for the apostates.* The warning against the apostasy is further illustrated in 6:7–8. The sentence structure of these verses may be diagrammed as follows:⁴⁰

³⁵ It is sometimes asked how a person can become an apostate if he/she was not a believer from the beginning. It appears that the word has to do with the perception of a person by other believers. In 6:4–6, these individuals are described as apostates (i.e., those who have fallen away) because other believers including the author assumed that they were part of them, but their action shows that they are not. In this sense the word “apostates” is used.

³⁶ Josephus, *Vit.* 420; *Bell.* 2.306; 5.449; *Ant.* 2.73; 11.246.

³⁷ For example, see J. Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924) 79; Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 171.

³⁸ H. Schlier, “παραδειγματίζω,” *TDNT* 2:32.

³⁹ A. Mugridge, “Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews: An Exegetical and Theological Study,” *RTR* 46 (1987) 77.

⁴⁰ The translation of Greek text is based on NASB with a slight modification.

- 6:7 γῆ γὰρ ἡ (1) πιῶσα τὸν ἐπ’ αὐτῆς ἐρχόμενον πολλάκις ὑετόν
(for the ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it)
- καὶ
- (2) τίκτουσα βοτάνην εὐθετον ἐκείνοις δι’ οὗς καὶ
γεωργεῖται (and brings forth vegetation useful to
those for whose sake it is also tilled),
- μεταλαμβάνει εὐλογίας ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ([the ground] receives a
blessing from God).
- 6:8 ἐκφέρουσα δὲ ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους (but if it
yields thorns and thistles),
- ἄδοκιμος καὶ κατάρως ἐγγύς, ἧς τὸ τέλος εἰς καῦσιν (it is worth-
less and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned).

In this diagram one can see that the subject of both v. 7 and v. 8 is γῆ (ground). The contrast here is between the land which is fruitful and the land which is unfruitful (i.e. blessing vs. curse). In these verses the author of Hebrews employs an agricultural parable to speak of the fate of those who fall away. The descriptions of the apostates as having produced “thorns” and “thistles,” and their fate of being “worthless” and “cursed” and “burned” clearly indicate what God will do with the apostates. That vv. 7–8 are related to vv. 4–6 is evident from the author’s use of γὰρ in v. 7, which shows that it is a further description of the consequences for the apostates. The final outcome of re-crucifying Christ by apostasy is burning in the fire in the eschatological sense. The author of Hebrews expresses himself with such a stern warning to plead with his readers not to abandon Christ.⁴¹

The author’s description of the characteristics of the apostates, the impossibility of renewing the apostates to repentance, and the severity of the judgment against the apostates indicate that faith, in Hebrews, is highly Christological. In this passage (6:7–8) the idea of faith in Jesus is expressed in negative terms. Just as the act of unbelief (or deliberate rejection) by people caused Jesus to be crucified according to the Gospels, so the act of apostasy among some members of the Christian community of Hebrews will cause Jesus to be crucified again. This exegetical finding clearly supports this writer’s contention that the author of Hebrews considered Jesus as the object and the content of faith.

3. *Relationship between faith and the word of God.* Lastly, the Christological aspect of faith can be noticed from faith’s relationship to the word of God.⁴² In 6:13–20 the idea of Jesus being the object of faith is depicted in terms of the word of God. In this passage the author relates God’s oath to

⁴¹ R. Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden: Brill, 1970) 246.

⁴² I am fully aware of the fact that this is a less obvious point than the previous ones discussed to argue for the Christological aspect of faith. However, I find that the author of Hebrews implicitly sets forth the Christological aspect of faith by the concept of the word of God.

fulfill his promises to believers' steadfastness to hold onto the promise of God. At this point it seems appropriate to bring out the author's emphasis on steadfastness. In 6:12 the author exhorts the readers not to become dull but to become imitators of those who through faith and patience (διὰ πίστεως καὶ μακροθυμίας) inherit the promises. The particle καὶ in 6:12 may be used epexegetically and be translated "faith, that is, patience."⁴³ Or, it could be an example of hendiadys, meaning, "persevering faith."⁴⁴ In either case "faith" and "perseverance" are related to each other and μακροθυμία brings out an aspect of what faith is. This idea can be supported from the use of μακροθυμέω (to wait patiently) in 6:15. For the author of Hebrews, faith involves perseverance or steadfastness.

In order to demonstrate the persevering aspect of faith, the author of Hebrews employs Abraham's example of steadfastness in vv. 13–15 to show that Abraham obtained the promise of God by waiting for it patiently (μακροθυμήσας). The reference to "obtaining the promise" in 6:15 seems to refer to Abraham's receiving back of Isaac from the "dead" in the land of Moriah (Genesis 22) rather than to the birth of Isaac. A comparison of the citation in 6:15 with the Septuagint's translation of Gen 22:17 shows that the author of Hebrews closely follows the LXX version of Gen 22:17.⁴⁵ Moreover, the author's description in Heb 6:13 of "God swearing by himself" seems to correspond to Gen 22:16 rather than to God's initial promise in Genesis 12. Thus the author's point is that Abraham reaffirmed the divine approval by waiting patiently for God's promise.

Then what was Abraham's object of faith? The context clearly indicates that it was his faith in God's promise. The notion of God swearing by himself signifies that he is bound to his word by his character and provides the guarantee that excludes doubt and affirms the abiding validity of the promise.⁴⁶ Thus Abraham's belief was in a God who was able to fulfill what he had promised, specifically, what he had promised him (i.e. to Abraham). In other words, Abraham's behavior of steadfastness itself is "an index of a responsiveness to God and to his promise-quality Word."⁴⁷ In this sense, it can be said that the promise of God and his faithfulness to keep his word were the very object of Abraham's faith (cf. Rom 4:20–21). Putting it another way, Abraham's faith was faith in God himself.

It is to be noted that here in this passage faith is expressed in terms of believing in God's promise and his ability to fulfill it. It has also been observed from the previous discussion that the author uses the expressions "oracles of God" (5:12) and "faith toward God" (6:1) in place of expressions such as "faith in Jesus Christ," "trust in Jesus" or the like. Do these expressions necessarily

⁴³ James H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. 3, *Syntax*, by Nigel Turner (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963) 335.

⁴⁴ Grässer, *Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief* 28; Ellingworth, *Hebrews* 333.

⁴⁵ James Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in Light of the Aqedah* (AnBib 94; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1981) 184. Attridge observes that the author follows Gen 22:17 with a slight modification (*Epistle to the Hebrews* 179).

⁴⁶ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* 151.

⁴⁷ G. R. Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 79.

suggest that faith in Hebrews is removed from Christ and his work? In what ways are these phrases related to the Christological aspect of faith? These questions can be answered in two ways:

First, an examination of other NT writings shows that describing the Christian faith in terms of faith in God is not unique to the author of Hebrews. This idea is also used by other authors of Scriptures to refer to an acceptance of Christian proclamation. For example, in 1 Thess 1:8 the conversion of the Thessalonians is described in terms of “faith in God” (πίστις πρὸς τὸν θεόν). This faith in God is further elaborated in vv. 9–10 as “turning from idols to serve a living and true God” (v. 9) and “waiting for his Son (i.e. Jesus) from heaven” (v. 10). Likewise, in Acts 20:21, Luke uses “repentance toward God” and “faith in our Lord Jesus” side by side (see also 1 Pet 1:21). Thus it is evident that the idea of “faith in God” can be a synonymous phrase for “faith in Jesus Christ.” Bultmann succinctly states this point as follows:

Whereas in the OT and Judaism (except in propaganda) faith is required as the appropriate attitude to the God who has long since made Himself known as whose existence cannot be doubted, the primitive Christian kerygma brings the message that there is one God, and with this it also brings the message about Jesus Christ His Son, and about what God has done and will do through Him. Acceptance of this kerygma is πιστεύειν.⁴⁸

Second, the context of Heb 5:11–6:8 clearly indicates that the description of faith in terms of faith in God or God’s promise is none other than faith in Christ himself. It may be recalled from the previous discussion of 5:11–6:2 that the phrase “the beginning principles about the oracles of God” (5:12) is identical to “the elementary doctrine of Christ” (6:1). Moreover, it was also revealed that the six elements described in 6:2–4 are a further elaboration of the elementary doctrine of Christ in 6:1a. In this sense the author’s description of “faith toward God” in 6:1 is to be regarded as “faith in Christ.” Furthermore, a careful exegesis of 6:4–6 makes it evident that the author’s concept of faith is related to Christ. I have already pointed out in the previous section that the characteristics of these apostates have to do with the rejection of Christ. More specifically, it may be noted that the phrase “having tasted the good word of God” (6:5) has Christological implications because the author describes the impossibility of renewal of these apostates by employing two participial clauses (6:6): it is because they crucify again the Son of God and publicly put him to shame. For this reason rejecting the word of God may be equated to rejecting the salvific work of Christ. Thus it may be concluded that, for the author of Hebrews, having God or God’s words as the object of faith is equivalent to having Jesus as the object of faith.

In summary, the above analysis shows that faith in Hebrews is not removed from Christ; it has Jesus as the object of faith as in Pauline epistles. For the author of Hebrews “the beginning principles of the word of God” is another way of stating “the beginning teaching about Christ.” The characteristics and

⁴⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, “Πιστεύω, κτλ.,” *TDNT* 6:174–228.

the consequences of the apostates indicate that they are the ones who deliberately reject Christ. The author's expressions of "the word of God" and "faith toward God" are equivalent to "faith in Christ." In this sense, faith in Hebrews is Christologically oriented.

III. CHRIST AS THE MODEL OF FAITH

A careful examination of Heb 5:11–6:20 also reveals that Jesus is construed not only as the object of faith, but also as the model of faith. Again, going back to 6:11–12, the author of Hebrews admonishes the readers to demonstrate the same eagerness in the work and the love which they showed by serving the saints (v. 11). The purpose of this exhortation is indicated by the *ἵνα*-clause in v. 12: "that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and perseverance inherit the promises."⁴⁹ The concept of imitating faith appears to run throughout 6:12–20. It has already been revealed from the discussion of the relationship between faith and the word of God that the purpose of 6:13–15 is to illustrate that Abraham is one of those who inherited the promises by faith and perseverance. Another purpose for the inclusion of the illustration about Abraham in 6:13–15 may be that the author wants the readers also to imitate the steadfastness of Abraham. This idea is supported by the author's argument in 6:17–18. In those verses, the author of Hebrews continues with the discussion of the irrevocable nature of God's oath which he spoke in Gen 22:16–17. The author of Hebrews, however, has Christians as his emphasis, who are designated as the heirs of the promise (ταῖς κληρονόμοις τῆς ἐπαγ γελίας).⁵⁰ The purpose of God in intervening with an oath is for believers to have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope that lies ahead of them (v. 18). In other words, the reason why the author of Hebrews connects 6:13–15 and 6:16–18 with the theme of an oath is to show the need for believers to imitate Abraham's persevering faith. As Lane states, "the unchanging purpose of God provides a strong reason for emulating the trust and steadfastness of Abraham."⁵¹

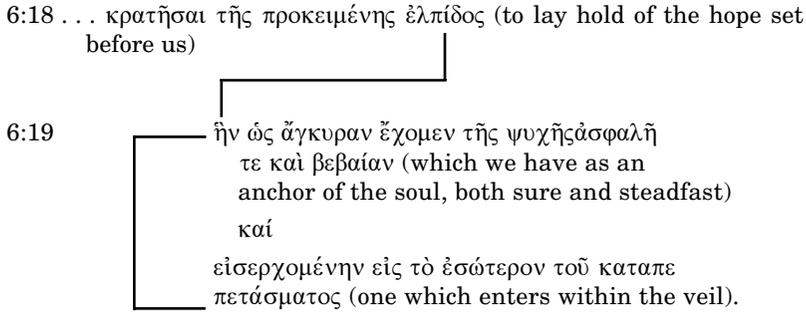
Then how does the emulation of Abraham's faith relate to the believers' imitation of Christ? This relationship may be observed from the link between 6:18 and 6:19. In 6:18 the author mentions that believers have fled for safety to lay hold of the hope set before them. The idea of hope goes back to Abraham's faith in waiting patiently for God's promise, as seen in 6:13–15. As Abraham hoped for what God had promised him, so do the believers in the new covenant hope for that which is set before them. What is the believers' hope? It is explained in 6:19. In this verse the relative pronoun ἣν (which) takes ἐλπὶς (hope) as its antecedent, which in turn is related to εἰσερχομένην (i.e. one which enters). This may be illustrated as follows:⁵²

⁴⁹ NASB translation.

⁵⁰ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* 152.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² The translation is a slight variation of NASB.



This diagram allows one to see that it is hope that enters within the curtain in the heavenly sanctuary where Jesus has already entered as a forerunner by becoming a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.⁵³ The implication is that hope penetrates behind the curtain and it is by this hope that we believers draw near to God (7:19).⁵⁴ The term “forerunner” (πρόδρομος) is used only here in the NT. In the classical Greek the word was used in the sense of going before by running.⁵⁵ Apparently, the author of Hebrews has this sense in mind in 6:20. It has the idea that Jesus is the model of faith for his followers. Thus the author’s exhortation to have strong encouragement to hold fast to (κρατέω) this hope (v. 18b) suggests that believers ought to imitate the act of Jesus in entering inside the curtain. It is also to be noted that the author uses the verb εἰσερχομαι (to enter) both in vv. 19 and 20. However, the author uses the aorist tense (εἰσῆλθεν) with reference to Jesus, but the present tense (εἰσερχομένην) with reference to believers. The implication is clear: “In hope, believers may now enter where Jesus has already entered in reality, namely, into the heavenly sanctuary.”⁵⁶ Thus the author’s exhortation to follow the steadfastness of Abraham is equivalent to having persistent faith in Christ. In the author’s mind imitating those who inherit the promises (6:12) is equivalent to imitating Christ. In this sense in Hebrews Jesus is to be considered the model of faith which believers ought to emulate.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A careful examination of 5:11–6:20 reveals that faith in Hebrews is very much Christological. The concept of faith in Hebrews is not to be defined solely in terms of Jesus being the model and enabler of faith as Hamm suggests. Rather, Jesus is also portrayed as the object of faith for believers. Phrases such as “the beginning principles about God’s oracles” in 5:12 and

⁵³ Grammatically speaking, it is possible to take the antecedent of the participle εἰσερχομένην as ἄγκυραν. If this is what the author had in mind, then v. 19 is to be translated “the anchor which enters within the veil.” This is the view held by Attridge (see Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 178, 183–184). On the other hand, Lane prefers to take ἐλπίδος (hope) as the antecedent of εἰσερχομένην (Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* 153).

⁵⁴ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* 153–154.

⁵⁵ Herodotus 7.203; 9.14; Polybius, *Hist.* 12.20.7.

⁵⁶ Ellingworth, *Hebrews* 347.

“the beginning teaching about Christ” in 6:1 suggest that Christ is the content (or the object) of faith. Moreover, in the analysis of 6:4–8, the characteristics of those who fall away, the reasons for their impossibility to be renewed again, and the final consequence of the apostates clearly indicate that the initial faith of the apostates has to do with faith in Jesus. Thus it can be said that the concept of faith expressed in 6:4–8 is parallel to Paul’s idea of trusting Jesus as one’s Savior.

This passage also demonstrates that Jesus is the model of faith for believers as Hamm has correctly pointed out. The author of Hebrews depicts Jesus as being the model of faith in two ways: (1) by exhorting the readers to imitate Abraham’s trust and his steadfastness (note: following the example of Abraham is equivalent to believing in the promise of God, which, in turn, is also identical to persevering faith in Jesus) and (2) by reminding the readers that Jesus is our forerunner (πρόδρομος) who entered inside the curtain. The author exhorts the readers to enter the curtain, as Jesus did.

As for the characteristics of faith, the author shows that faith involves the quality of steadfastness. However, unlike Grässer’s contention, this quality of faith is not merely an ethical element; it is based on the attributes of God (i.e. God is not unjust to forget your work and the love which you showed . . . [6:10]) and on the promise of God. The apostle Paul also uses this aspect of faith to refer to Christian faith. Therefore it may be concluded that faith in Hebrews is based on Christology; for the author of Hebrews, faith cannot exist without Christ and his work. In Hebrews, Jesus is regarded both as the object and the model of faith for believers.