

## NOW WHAT? Back to the Basics

### DISCIPLINE – Part 3 The Exercise of Meeting Together

#### Introduction

It is the utmost of sadness when we observe a friend confess Christ as their Savior and for a time we enjoy wonderful fellowship – but then for some reason they become more and more absent from the Church and its gatherings. Time goes by and we hear of them living as if they had totally left the faith.

Although it surprises us, it shouldn't. The Parable of the Soils gives us adequate warning that there will be some "... *when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away*" (Luke 8:13, ESV). For many of us we are shaken to the core when we see this happen. Often what comes out of our mouth is, "What in the world went wrong?" I can tell you that there are many reasons, but this morning we are going to see that the Letter to the Hebrews will give us one – one reason why some people seem to fall away from the faith.

#### Context

Many of you are familiar with the Letter to the Hebrews. The letter to the Hebrews has the characteristics of a sermon. The first-century audience of Hebrews was experiencing opposition to their faith in Jesus by the religious Jews and facing pressure to return to the religious, ritualistic traditions of Judaism. The problem is deeper than simply reverting to religious ceremonies. To reject the superiority of Christ for other things is serious.

For the recipients of this letter they were being pressured to turn from Christ and go back to Temple worship.

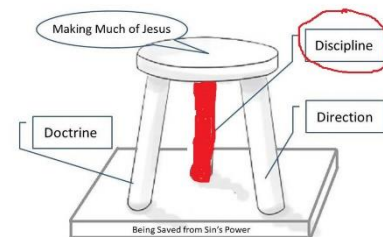
For the recipients of Paul's letter to the Galatian churches it was adding circumcision to Christ.

For the recipients of Paul's letter to the Colossian churches it was adding worldly philosophy and practices to Christ.

In every case the problem was the same: **Losing their original confidence in Christ.**

Our text this morning gives us one reason why this happens. Turn with me to Hebrews 3:7–14 (ESV),

#### Now What?



<sup>7</sup> Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, <sup>8</sup> do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, <sup>9</sup> where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. <sup>10</sup> Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ <sup>11</sup> As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’” <sup>12</sup> Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. <sup>14</sup> For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

Before we get into the text, please accept a kind warning. Many of us read passages like this and rather than really hear the author, we enter mental debates of whether a person can or cannot lose their salvation. I plead with you not to do that. This warning is written to professing Christians and the danger expressed is one of “falling away”. It is not an idle warning. It is real. The Greek verb is ἀφίστημι [af-is-tay-mee] meaning to withdraw, depart, desert, become faithless, etc.

Please note verse 14. The identifiable characteristic of the true Christian, the one who has come to “share in Christ” is holding on in one’s original confidence to the end. This means that their faith and trust in Christ, both in words and actions, is maintained throughout their lives. It does not mean they are perfect. It does not mean they never falter or fail. It is not the perfection of their lives that’s at issue: it’s the direction of their lives. So, the question we face this morning is how does it happen that one who originally confesses faith in Christ fails to maintain that faith?

### **Holding Our Original Confidence**

#### **The Two Opposite Realities**

Please note the mind of the Spirit. Two opposite realities are taught in this passage:

1. “An evil, unbelieving heart;”<sup>1</sup> and in contrast,
2. “Our original confidence firm to the end.”<sup>2</sup>

This morning, as I look over this congregation, there are two possible hearts. One is a heart that is holding on to its trust in Christ; and the other is an evil, unbelieving heart. Someone might say, “I don’t have such a heart.” It never crosses my mind to be that kind of person. Please note my friend: God, the author, makes it plain: the opposite of a heart of faith; the opposite of a heart that continues in faithful living to God, is a heart that is evil and unbelieving. This is not my description. God says, “If you do not continue to follow hard after me, you have a sinful, unbelieving heart.

So, we have before us in our minds a person who expressed faith toward Christ and today is living in unbelief. What happened? The diagnosis of the Holy Spirit is this: They were “hardened by the

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Heb 3:12). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Heb 3:14). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

deceitfulness of sin.”<sup>3</sup> Here’s the deal: Sin gives the illusion that disobedience is more rewarding than obedience. Sin gives the impression that faithfulness is less pleasurable than unfaithfulness. Sin gives the delusion that culture of the world is more satisfying than Christ. Remember Demas? *“For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica . . .”* (2 Timothy 4:10a, ESV). So, notice again the downward spiral:

Expressed faith in Christ

→ tricked by sin’s pleasure

→ hard, unbelieving heart; and

→ then we hear these horrible words: “fall[ing] away from the living God.”<sup>4</sup>

It will prove to be a most dangerous thing if any among us would say, “That would never happen to me.” The Bible, Church history and our church history give ample evidence that this bravado, this arrogance, this self-confidence is ill conceived. I sat with a young man, last Fall, at my table. I looked at him and said these words, “I can’t believe that what I saw in you was fake.” As he sat there and my wife served him supper, I saw a man ruined; his family ruined; his economy ruined; his health ruined; and so on. All I could remember was the vibrant, enthusiastic testimony he once had in our congregation. What a train wreck. Oh, Beloved we must take this seriously.

What steps can we take to minimize this reality? Note the solution that we are given: *“But exhort one another every day . . .”* (Hebrews 3:13, ESV). How do we do that? The answer is given more plainly in Chapter 10: *“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”* (Hebrews 10:24–25, ESV)

Most Christians are familiar with the statement: “I’m a Christian, I just don’t believe in Church;” or “You don’t have to go to Church to be a Christian;” and so on. Many of us have a ready answer for such statements. We know that it is Christ who saves. We know that it is faith alone that connects us to Christ’s saving work. We know that it is by grace we are saved. We know that. But mature Christians are also aware of the admonition of the author of Hebrews: *“not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”* (Hebrews 10:25, ESV).

## **Conclusion**

If I were to ask you the question, “Why should we not neglect meeting together, as a Church?” I’m sure that there would be a number of good answers.

- We meet together to learn together.

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<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Heb 3:13). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Heb 3:12). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

- We meet together to work out all the “*one anothers*”: to encourage, to pray, to bear burdens, etc. etc.
- We meet together to provide a corporate witness.
- We meet together for worship.

The Letter to the Hebrews gives us the most definitive reason why the Church should not forsake meeting together: So, we don't lose our original confidence in the Lord. “Meeting together” is intended by God to keep us steadfast and faithful. I have never known anyone who professed faith in Christ and yet withdrew from the fellowship of believers who survived. None! Take a piece of cake; separate it from the whole; leave it alone on the counter; and it will slowly rot and die. It will slowly shrivel and shrink. The same thing will happen to you and I if we absent ourselves from the regular, ongoing, continual meeting of God's people. Why? Because part of biblical fellowship is to “*to stir up one another to love and good works.*” Sanctification, growth in holiness is a community project. It takes a church to grow a Christian. I don't have to meet together with Christians to be a Christian; but I can't be one without it.

### **Application**

I find two applications this morning. Firstly, I note that I'm preaching to the gathered Church telling you to gather as a Church. It sounds like I'm preaching to the choir, so to speak. For many of you, I honor you and thank the Lord for you – for your faithful attendance on Sundays. But Beloved there is so much more included in this text. We read, “But exhort one another every day.”<sup>5</sup> Other synonyms for “exhort” are “stir one another up” or “encourage”. It can mean give comfort, instruction, strength and so on. It's from the Greek word παρακαλέω [par-ak-al-eh-o] meaning to come along side. So we can't obey this in isolation. We cannot obey this without human contact. It means we must connect with someone. What does that look like if we are to obey this text?

- a. First, note that the command is to all Christians, not just the pastors and paid staff. If you are a Christian, before this day is out, you are to exhort/encourage/give comfort/instruct/strengthen another Christian.
- b. Second, it could mean that you look around the Church this morning and you see that someone is missing. You call them. You text them a word of encouragement. You visit them.
- c. Third, it starts at home. Can you imagine a husband, a wife, parents and children intentionally applying this verse? Imagine a spouse choosing to every day encourage, give strength, perhaps instruct their husband or wife. Parents, are you exhorting/encouraging/comforting/instructing your children every day – in the Lord?
- d. Fourth, it enters our prayer life? Can we commit today to pray every day that the Spirit of God will direct us to some Christian who needs encouragement.
- e. Fifth, it interrupts our weekly plans. The story is told of a new pastor to a church. Once there, he thought it would be good to visit members of the church, so he asked for a list of names and addresses. One of the Elders of the flock gave him a list. Behind quite a few of the names were

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<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Heb 3:13). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

three letters, “smo.” “What does smo mean?” asked the preacher. “That stands for Sunday Morning Only” said the Elder. If that describes you, you need to consider carefully the opportunities you miss when you choose not to attend Sunday School; when you choose not to attend a small group. Be it known unto you: The best pastoral care opportunities come from small groups who “stir one another on to love and good works”.

We have a daily responsibility to encourage, exhort one another. *“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called **‘today’** . . .”* (Hebrews 3:13, ESV). Did you see the today? We live in a time called *today!* Today, is the day you hear God’s voice (Psalm 95:7). If God has spoken to you today, today is when you respond. Every day you delay your heart grows harder. Today is the day you show someone that you care.