
HEBREWS

Realizing Our Great Salvation

I:1-2:4

"How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (2:3).

In the hymn "The Church's One Foundation," the people of God are portrayed as living through "toil and tribulation" which involves oppression from the outside and schism and heresy from within. If a hymn writer of today wanted to portray the struggles of God's people in the twentieth century, he would probably describe it another way. In the western world, our problem is not "toil and tribulation" from the outside. Nor is our major problem that we are "by heresies distressed." The problem in the latter part of the twentieth century is that the church encounters indifference from the outside and apathy from its own people.

THREATENING VOICES

It is not easy to know what to say to people whose struggle is not against persecution, but rather against apathy. The apathy has been created by a culture that considers Christianity tired and bereft of anything to say. It is discouraging to notice that people who are tired of the Christian message do not merely give up on religion. They turn to substitute religions. For some people, political ideology is the new "savior." It can build its own "new heaven and new earth," especially when it consumes our energy and promises its own glorious future. In recent times, a surprising number of people have turned to new forms and theories of psychology in order to "find themselves." Psychology is, of course, a useful discipline in many circumstances. But

some forms can also serve as a substitute religion, complete with a promise of release from guilt and a salvation that is found when we discover our essential selves. In many places, especially among the affluent, salvation is sought everywhere but in the church. Many other worthwhile areas can become religions if they are treated as the "ultimate concern" of their followers.

If the church is threatened today by the claims of other voices, it is not the first time. As early as the Epistle to the Hebrews, the church was in danger of being "carried away by varied and strange teachings" (13:9). The church has always been tempted to try to revitalize itself by accommodating those other voices which become popular. Some people have always tried to show the basic compatibility of Christianity with whatever political system was popular. Germans during the Third Reich tried to show its compatibility with National Socialism; Marxists tried to show its compatibility with Marxism; capitalists have tried to show that Christianity supports the free enterprise system. Today we are tempted to revitalize the church by importing the latest theories of psychology or sociology or human development and combining them with a few Christian terms. It is tempting to find our relevance to the outside world by giving it a message that fits popular tastes.

To a certain extent, this desire to speak the language of the people is understandable, for behind it there is the desire to communicate. From the days of the apostles until now, Christians have recognized the need for "becoming all

things to all men." Anyone who has tried to proclaim the gospel in another culture knows that the story has to be told in such a way that the listeners will understand.

There is danger, however, in accommodation. The message may be so adapted to the tastes of the audience that the church is left with no clear voice. We begin to think that interest in the life of the church can be revived if only the message affirms what is already popular.

A CLEAR VOICE (1:1-4)

In one sense, the author of Hebrews has probably accommodated his message to his audience. This book is unique in its style and method of presentation. Probably this difference of style is the result of the author's attempt to address an audience different from those addressed in other books. What is most striking about this book is its elegant Greek style, perhaps the best style in the New Testament. Readers have observed for centuries that the author of Hebrews uses a wider philosophical vocabulary than anyone else in the New Testament. The writer declares the gospel in terms that could be accepted by educated people of the Greek world. Indeed, the first four verses of Hebrews are written with a distinctive literary style. The first sentence has an alliteration that is unmatched in the New Testament (five words of the first sentence begin with the letter "p" in Greek). Even in English these verses have a striking rhetorical impact. Thus the author does accommodate himself to his readers.

But there is one point at which the author is uncompromising. He wants his readers to recognize that Jesus Christ is not just one voice among many. The first four verses summarize what the author says in the doctrinal portions of the book: Jesus Christ is God's final and ultimate voice. As the entire book suggests, we are capable of placing our hopes in a variety of spokesmen. We are tempted to make Jesus Christ one voice among others. Consequently, Hebrews is composed of a series of comparisons. Jesus is compared to angels (1—2), Moses (3:1-6), Joshua (4:8), and the levitical priests (7:1—10:18). But the author is always uncompromising: the Christian faith rests, not on the belief that Jesus is one voice among others, but on the belief that He is God's final word. At this point there is no accommodation to the tastes of the audience.

What did weary Christians need to hear to help preserve their Christian identity? They needed more than a pep talk. They needed to know about the essential facts of the Christian faith, the very facts to which they had confessed at their baptism. Perhaps the beautiful words of the first four verses of the book are actually the very words which the readers had once confessed at the beginning of their Christian lives. More than once the author reminds his readers of their "confession" (3:1; 10:23). It is a confession that they are summoned to "consider" and "hold fast."

The renewal of the church does not begin when the members repeat words which are popular and acceptable in their culture. It begins with the reminder that the church lives by a confession of faith that will not allow Jesus Christ to be one voice among others. Before the author appeals to his readers to keep the faith (2:1-4), he reminds them of the greatness of the faith that they have already confessed: God's final word has been declared in Jesus Christ.

ESSENTIAL BELIEFS

Churches have had their share of disputes in attempting to summarize the essential features of the Christian faith. Extensive creeds have been drawn up to determine what is the most important affirmation of Christianity. For the author of Hebrews, the essential fact is the place of Jesus Christ in the world. In 1:1-4 the writer uses one of the favorite terms of the entire epistle to describe Jesus Christ: He is God's Son (1:2, 5; 3:6; 5:5, 8) and final word. To say that Jesus is the Son of God is to describe His unique place in the world and in salvation. None of the other spokesmen have ever been like Him. We may appreciate other voices. We may learn from many teachers. But, as the author of Hebrews tells us, the last word has come in God's Son, who is different from all the rest.

The author then lists six features which make Jesus unique, which distinguish Him from all other beings. The words sound like the first chapter of John's Gospel and the beautiful passage in Colossians 1:15-20 which describes the unique status of Jesus. These six features describing Jesus Christ summarize all that the author wants to say about Him in the rest of the book. The story of Jesus may be divided, as this passage tells us, into three stages: (1) Jesus' role

in creation (“whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power”), (2) His earthly life as redeemer (“When He had made purification of sins. . . .”), and (3) His exalted status at the right hand of God (“He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”). Throughout the book, these are the essential facts of the Christian faith. Without the story of Jesus’ earthly life, Christianity would be reduced to myth. Consequently, the book reminds us that Jesus was a man (2:17; 4:15; 5:8). Without His exaltation to God’s right hand (8:1), Christianity would be only a human adventure.

The words of 1:1-4 describe Jesus in His full dignity. They apply to no one else. These verses tell why He is “better” than the angels (1:4) and Moses (3:1-6). He is not one voice among many.

The author begins in these verses with affirmations about the dignity of Jesus Christ. He knows that his listeners will never pay the price of enduring if Jesus has merely brought a message that is available elsewhere. If the words of Jesus can be found among other spokesmen, there is no reason to endure. Consequently, renewal begins with going back to the essential affirmations of our faith: the recognition that Jesus is unlike any rival.

ARGUMENTS FROM SCRIPTURE (1:5-13)

When the Hebrews’ writer states his claim about Jesus Christ, he always refers back to his Bible, the Old Testament. He knew that Christianity would not survive unless it was firmly rooted in Scripture. Claims which were not based on Scripture would have been empty. Thus in 1:5-13 he supports the majestic affirmations of 1:1-4 by demonstrating from Scripture that Christ is “better than the angels” (1:4). He quotes seven passages from the Old Testament, mostly from the Psalms, describing the unique status of Jesus Christ. It is as if the entire Old Testament is the story of Jesus Christ.

How is Christ unique? The author has not arranged these quotations in a haphazard way. He has chosen Scriptures which illustrate the major themes of the book. The first two passages in verse 5 (Psalms 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14), for instance, reaffirm that Jesus is God’s unique Son. The third

passage in verse 6 quotes Deuteronomy 32:43 and suggests that angels recognize His unique status. Verses 7 through 12 demonstrate *how* Jesus is superior to angels. There is a recurring emphasis on the fact that Jesus Christ is now eternal and unchangeable. In verse 8, for instance, we read that the Old Testament affirms that His throne is “forever and ever.” In verses 10 and 11, we learn that the Son who created the world (1:2, 3) stands above its change and decay. “They will perish, but Thou remainest” (1:11). Nature will be subject to change, but the Son always remains the same (1:12). Thus the most significant fact about the exalted status of Jesus is that He, unlike other spokesmen, is always the same.

This “sameness” of Jesus Christ is a major theme in Hebrews. Indeed, one of the most memorable passages of the entire book comes near the end: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever” (13:8). According to 7:24, He is the great high priest who “abides forever.”

If Jesus Christ is the one among all other leaders who remains “the same,” it would be absurd to turn elsewhere for salvation. But both ancient and modern people have tried to revitalize the church by accommodating the Christian message to popular tastes, not by reaffirming that Jesus Christ is God’s final word. We are tempted to show how Christianity agrees with a certain political philosophy or secular cause. The church may become the place where we offer courses in “pop psychology” or self-awareness, as if the answer to our problem is to be more “with it.” The Epistle to the Hebrews has a different response. The answer for a tiring church, Hebrews says, is to reaffirm our essential confession: Jesus Christ is God’s final word to us. All other causes will disappear.

The growth of new religious movements in recent years demonstrates that people, in a world filled with change and insecurity, are looking for an anchor for their lives. The rate of change disturbs people. They watch as the values, traditions, and standards of the past collapse. The author of Hebrews knew that we find this anchor only when we discover the One who remains the same, not in accommodating the faith to the prevailing tastes.

A WORD OF EXHORTATION (2:1-4)

When we come to the “therefore” of 2:1 (RSV),

we begin to understand why a book that was intended to awaken a weary church devotes all of chapter 1 to the affirmation of the church's faith. In 2:1-4 the author demonstrates that his weighty arguments of chapter 1 have a practical result for the life of the church. Now he sounds like a concerned preacher. He addresses his audience in the first person: "We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it" (2:1); "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (2:3). The personal address suggests that the author is a preacher who identifies with the needs of the church. As he says, "we" have heard something which needs to be taken seriously.

Why has the author devoted so much space to weighty arguments before addressing his audience personally? He sees his community, like communities we have seen, in the process of "drifting away" (2:1). The image of "drifting away" is a nautical term. It suggests a ship on the sea which drifts along without anchor. It is as if he had said, "Christians are like a ship. Without an anchor they drift aimlessly along." Or, as 2:3 says, they will "neglect" their "great salvation." The Greek word for "neglect" (*ameleo*) was often used in the New Testament for people who had no appreciation for a valuable item (1 Timothy 4:14), such as when the guests in Jesus' parable of the banquet "made light" (*ameleo*) of the invitation (Matthew 22:5).

The great affirmations of chapter 1 have thus preceded the exhortation in 2:1-4 because the author wants his readers to recognize what a "great salvation" they have. It might not be a tragedy to "drift away" from or "neglect" a new fad. But a great salvation is too important to be thrown away. It needs to be taken seriously. The author says, "For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard." "What we have heard" is too important to be taken lightly.

The church may respond to apathy among its people today with a bit of embarrassment over the content of its message. "What we have heard" sometimes seems to be like a record worn smooth after too much playing. The Christian story may appear to be in need of accommodation to new ideas. But the author of Hebrews declares that our hope lies in taking seriously the "great salvation" which we have heard. As he suggests in 2:3,

4, it has been validated not only in the life of Jesus, but also in the lives of countless others.

Renewal in the church begins not by pushing our original confession of faith into the background, but by taking seriously the words confessed at baptism. The renewal of the church today cannot avoid a return to the one story which serves as an anchor for our lives.

—James Thompson

QUOTATIONS

"Some preachers of the past have read the Bible on their knees. George Whitefield is an example. He even read Matthew Henry's commentary on his knees."

"It is instructive . . . to realize how many of the men and women in the pews almost did not come to church that morning."

William Muehl, *Why Preach? Why Listen?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 11.

Deductive and Inductive Teaching

"One other way to characterize the deductive and inductive poles of personal evangelism is to observe that the deductive focuses more on content, whereas the inductive throws the light more on context. Deductive evangelism is concerned more with the content of the message to be shared. Inductive evangelism believes that the context will determine to a great extent what is to be shared and when."

Delos Miles
Introduction to Evangelism

"Love is the hinge on which hospitality turns to open its door. But just as a door has hinges, it also has a lock. And love never opens a locked door to a wolf—even if it is dressed in sheep's clothing."

Charles R. Swindoll
New Testament Postcards, 15

"Christians are to pray and give thanks at all times (Ephesians 6:18), for all saints (Ephesians 6:18), in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:17, 18), in everything (Philippians 4:6, 7), and in every place (1 Timothy 2:8)."