

# **Reflections on the Holy Spirit and the Christian life from The Book of Hebrews**

**Article by Robin – of interest re the “Rest of God”.**

On reading Hebrews, at first glance it does not appear to have the same emphasis other New Testament writers give to the Holy Spirit regarding the growth of the faith life of the individual believer. For example, B. M. Fanning, in his enumeration of theological points in Hebrews, omits completely to mention any theology of the Holy Spirit<sup>1</sup>.

In this paper we will look at:

1. The general view of the Holy Spirit in Hebrews
2. The Christian life resulting from Holy Spirit's action in the believer's life.

We will see that the view of the author of Hebrews is in harmony with other New Testament writers, notably Luke, Paul and John.

## **The Holy Spirit brings miraculous signs and wonders**

There are seven specific occasions where the Holy Spirit is mentioned in Hebrews. In Hebrews 2:4 “Gifts of the Holy Ghost” are listed in the same category as “signs, wonders and diverse miracles”. Here the author shows his concept to be the same as that of Luke, who presented the “many wonders and signs” (Acts 2:43) done by the apostles as the result of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:2-4. F.F. Bruce says “The mighty works, wonders and signs (of Acts).. were associated particularly with the bestowal of the Spirit, as indeed they are here (in Hebrews) ...”<sup>2</sup>. Bruce goes on to say that the author's reference to these manifestations of the Holy Spirit's power shows that they were well known to the recipients of the New Testament letters. The Hebrews author has just the

same attitude as Paul, Peter and Luke in referring to the evidence of these manifestations to authenticate the Gospel, and in crediting the manifestations to the action of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Holy Spirit is the author of scripture**

Hebrews 3:7, 9:8 and 10:15 credit the Holy Spirit with authoring the scriptures. This shows a very high view of the Holy Spirit. The author of Hebrews indiscriminately refers to either the Holy Spirit or to God as being the author of scripture, making no difference between the two. Whereas the Holy Spirit is cited as the author in the above examples, in many other references throughout the letter, God is cited as author<sup>3</sup>. Christ is cited as the author in 10:5. This shows that the author of Hebrews had a Trinitarian view of God, just like the other New Testament authors. Bruce makes the point that the Holy Spirit “is viewed as the author of the Old Testament revelation not only in its words, but also in its material content such as the plan for the wilderness tabernacle (9:8)”<sup>4</sup>. We can see from this that in the mind of the Hebrews author, it is not just that the Holy Spirit put God’s revelation or plan into words, but that God and the Holy Spirit are credited with doing the same things. In other words, in every sense of the term, the Holy Spirit is God. This is also supported by Heb 10:29, where “treading under foot” the Son of God is considered equivalent to “doing despite” to the Spirit of Grace, and by implication, to God himself. The Son, the Spirit, and by implication the Father are all considered one.

An extension of the author’s belief that the Holy Spirit authored scripture must have been his belief that the Holy Spirit was in the process of inspiring his own authorship of the Hebrews letter. This is evident in the authoritative manner of his writing of the epistle.

There is nothing remotely resembling hesitancy in the manner of writing. Baxter describes the tone as one of “apostolic teaching authority”. He writes, “The form and the expression is kindly, but there is no concealing the underlying composure of Spirit-given certitude and finality<sup>5</sup>.” In this tone, the author gives us revelation such as could not possibly have been the product of a human mind unaided by the Holy Spirit. For instance, he lets us know that the Father addressed the words of Ps 2:7 to the Son, “You are my Son...”; and again Deut. 32:43 when he brought Jesus into the world, “Let all God’s angels worship him.”(Heb 1:5-6). Again, at that inestimable moment, the author of Hebrews informs us that the Son spoke to his Father the words of Ps 40:6-8: “...a body you have prepared for me....I have come to do your will...”(10:5-7). It is the Hebrews author who lets us know that the immortal words “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” from Ps 110:4 were addressed by the Father to the Son (7:17). Such intimacy of acquaintance with the mind of the Father and the Son can only have come from the Holy Spirit; and we know from his view of the role of the Holy Spirit in Biblical revelation that the author must have considered himself to have been filled with the Holy Spirit in writing these staggering revelations.

In fact, some of the most sublime revelations about Jesus in the Bible as a whole are given in Hebrews. The priesthood according to the order of Mechizedek and its superiority to the Levitical priesthood; the true tabernacle and the fact that the tabernacle of Moses was but an earthly copy of the true heavenly realities; the superiority of the sacrifice of Jesus over the Old Testament sacrifices; and the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old Covenant; all are priceless revelations made by the Holy Spirit to

the author. How well do the words of Jesus recorded in John find their fulfillment in the Book of Hebrews: “..when the Spirit of Truth is come, he will guide you into all truth..... He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it to you.” (Jn 16:13-14)

### **Christians are partakers of the Holy Spirit**

In Hebrews 6:4-5, Christians are said to be “partakers” of the Holy Spirit, this being associated with “being enlightened”, “having tasted the heavenly gift”, “having tasted the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come”. Proponents of “eternal security of the believer” have argued that this verse does not describe the experience of saved Christians at all, because, if they were truly saved, they could not “fall away”. For instance Fanning, though he admits that the verses “seem to reflect a genuine experience of Christian conversion”, finds that to view the verses in this way conflicts with a number of other verses from Hebrews (eg 7:25; 8:12) and also with a number of passages from elsewhere in the New Testament (eg John 10:25-30; Rom. 8:28-39)<sup>6</sup>. However, while the verses he cites do show conclusively that no external power can separate the believer from God, in my opinion they show that a believer can make a choice of his own volition to walk away from God.

This is surely the plain sense of these verses. Verse 6 considers the destiny of one who has “fallen away”. To take an example in the natural, if a man falls out of a boat, he must have been in the boat in the first place. In the same way one who has fallen away from the faith must have been in the faith in the first place. Next, the verse mentions “renewing them again to repentance”. This implies genuine repentance has taken place, otherwise

how could they be renewed again to it? This understanding is further reinforced by Heb. 10:29. One man who had no doubt that Heb. 6:4-5 reflected genuine Christian experience was John Wesley. He declared that the enlightenment spoken of was “with the light of the glorious love of God in Christ” and that the “heavenly gift” was “remission of sins, sweeter than honey and the honeycomb”. He went on to declare that it is a “plain relation of fact” that such people can subsequently “cast away both the power and form of godliness”<sup>7</sup>. For these reasons, my view is that these verses show that:

1. The Holy Spirit is integral to the Christian experience;
2. The believer, by his or her own choice, can walk away from that experience.

### **The Holy Spirit was integral to Jesus' own spiritual walk**

Not only is the Holy Spirit integral to the believer’s spiritual walk, but he is also integral to Jesus’ own spiritual walk, according to Hebrews. This is made clear by Heb 9:14, which declares that Jesus offered himself to God “through the eternal Spirit”. Bruce comments on this verse that behind the thinking of the author is the “Servant” of Isaiah, introduced in Is 42:1 in the words of God “I have put my Spirit upon him”. He writes “It is in the power of the Divine Spirit, accordingly, that the servant accomplishes every phase of his ministry, including the crowning phase in which he accepts death for the transgression of his people, filling the role of priest and victim....”<sup>8</sup> So we see that at the crowning moment of his ministry, Christ was enabled to fulfil his calling only by the Holy Spirit.

This concept is shared by Luke and John, in their Gospels and Acts. The Holy Spirit comes to empower Jesus for his ministry (Luke 3:22; John 1:33). Then, before his death,

Jesus explains to the disciples that it is good for them that he is “going away”, because he will send the Holy Spirit to them to enable them to fulfil their ministry; and they are to wait for the filling of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; Acts 2:1-4). The picture offered in Hebrews precisely complements this understanding, as we see the centrality of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual walk of both Jesus and ourselves.

### **The portrayal of the Spirit-led life in Hebrews**

So how does Hebrews present this Christian life which is lived by the power of the Holy Spirit? The overriding concern of the author of Hebrews is the sanctification or perfection of his readers. The background is that he was writing to Jewish believers who were wavering in their faith<sup>9</sup> and so the letter has several warnings on the dire consequences of apostasy. However, not only does the author warn against apostasy, but also urges the readers to “enter into (God’s) rest” (4:11); and to “go on unto perfection” (6:1). The walk by faith is portrayed as being “just” (10:38, quoted from Hab 2:4); yet those Old Testament saints who walked by faith could not be perfect without the new offering of Jesus (11:40). In Heb 12, the author gives the purpose of God’s discipline: “that we may share in his holiness”(12:10). He then urges the recipients “Make every effort....to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (12:14).

The emphasis on what Jesus has done for us is also on sanctification. Heb 2:11 states that “he that sanctifies (Jesus) and they who are sanctified are all one”. In 7:11, the goal is expressed as “perfection”; 7:19 states that the bringing in of a better hope is superior to the law, which “made nothing perfect”. Again in 9:9 it is said that the gifts and sacrifices of the Old Testament were unable to bring perfection in relation to conscience, whereas

the blood of Christ is able to (fully) purge our conscience (9:14). We have been sanctified (10:10) and perfected (10:14) by the offering of Jesus' body.

The New Covenant, quoted from Jeremiah in Heb 8:10-12, is also about sanctification. Wesley wrote "By this, an entire agreement with his holy and perfect laws is produced in our souls.<sup>10</sup>" That it is a work of the Holy Spirit is demonstrated elsewhere in the Bible in the parallel passage, no doubt familiar to our author, in Ezekiel 36:25-28: "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you shall keep my judgements, and do them." That the whole work of sanctification is a work of the Holy Spirit is seen from 6:4; 9:14 and 10:29, as outlined above, though the emphasis of Hebrews is more on its being a result of the sacrifice of Christ.

The concepts of sanctification and perfection are closely inter-related in the Greek. The key words used in English translations are predominantly *sanctified*; *holy*; *mature*; and *perfect*<sup>11</sup>. These terms are, however, used to translate Greek words deriving from only two roots: *hagios*, (sanctified or holy); and *teleios* (mature or perfect). The word *hagios* denotes clean and set apart for God's use, in the same way that the vessels in the Tabernacle were set apart for God's use.<sup>12</sup> The two Greek words are themselves fairly synonymous, as reflected in the equivalence of "we are *sanctified*" (*hagiazo* – Strongs 37) in 10:10 with "we are *perfected*" (*teleioo* – Strongs 5048) in 10:14. Again, while in English the words *perfect* and *mature* carry quite different meanings, they are only different translations of the Greek word *teleios*, which signifies "having reached its end"

(*telos*). In relation ethics, of a person, it signifies *fully grown*, or *mature*, according to Vines<sup>13</sup>. In the conceptual world of Hebrews, maturity means perfection.

Whereas Paul's emphasis was wanting his readers to be *right*, or *justified* before God; Luke's emphasis was power from God; the Hebrews author's concern is that his readers should be clean and perfect before God. But is this perfection, or sanctification complete for us who are living out the Christian life, or is it something the reader has to work out? On one hand, in 10:10, "we have been sanctified ....once for all"<sup>14</sup> the perfect tense is used; and the sanctification wrought has been wrought once for evermore by the sacrifice. In 2:11; 7:19 and 9:14 the sanctification of the believer has been accomplished by Christ. On the other hand, in 6:1 the reader has to go on to perfection. In 12:14 the readers have to "make every effort to be holy". In 4:11 we must "labour ...to enter that rest". The word for *labour* is *spoudazo* which means to be diligent; and implies the intense concentration of energy required to meet a goal<sup>15</sup>. Warnings throughout the epistle outline the dire consequences for the believer who fails to meet these requirements. Hebrews makes it plain that, while the provision of God's work is there, we have to co-operate with God, and, in fact, exercise all our power and will to lead holy lives, both individually and as a community (10:25; 12:15). In the latter two verses we are urged to watch out for one another and encourage each other to live a holy life, both outwardly and inwardly. This living of a holy, sanctified life is empowered by the Holy Spirit, but it is also something we have to actually do! We have to exercise our free will, given to us by God. This seems to be a point on which very few Christians in today's world seem to have an adequate understanding.

## The “rest” of God

Many generations of preachers have found in Hebrews chapters 3 – 4 a profound description of the sanctified Christian life, made possible by the Holy Spirit. This is described in Hebrews as the “rest” of God for the believer (3:11, 18; 4:1-11). The Greek word is *katapausis*; according to Strong a *reposing down; abode; rest* – from *katapauo* – *to settle down*; in Vine a *causing to cease or putting to rest*. Many modern commentators consider the “rest” speaks of the eternal rest after death, not a state of current Christian living in this life. For example, Bruce asserts that because the “rest” is compared to God’s rest after he had finished all his work of creation, the verse must indicate the heavenly, eternal rest of the believer after he has completed all his work according to God’s will at the end of this life. However, he does concede that “by faith, (the believer) may live in the good of it here and now”<sup>16</sup>. Perhaps the “rest” is only absolute and complete after death of the body – but Bruce doesn’t bring any convincing argument against applying the understanding of the “rest” to apply to this life. If we are to compare the believer’s “rest” with God’s “rest”, we must notice that God’s rest is not a cessation of activity, because God is still working in the world. Likewise, the natural rest for Israel, the entry into the Promised Land, which is a type of the spiritual rest offered to Christian believers, is not a cessation of activity. Rather it is a joyous, victorious battle when the Israelites are obedient to God and walking in his ways, but with the potential to turn to defeat when the Israelites depart from God’s ways. So it seems to speak more of the victorious Christian life in this world.

To apply it to life in this world would harmonise with the thought of Jn 17:3 “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” Also Mat 11:28-30: “Come unto me all you that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest . Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me.....and you shall find rest unto your souls”. Jesus was here talking of a rest attainable in this life. In the words of one author: “This is not a picture of inactivity or passivity, but of fruitful labor because of his instruction and leadership. Like a young and inexperienced ox yoked with a strong and gentle ox, I can learn to work with him and under his leadership. This is a picture of the kind of life each of us can experience with Jesus in the midst of this life's battles and struggles - if we come to him and learn from him and open ourselves to his gentleness and humility.<sup>17</sup>”

Calvin, in his commentary on Hebrews, writes about a “spiritual rest, to which.. God daily.. invites us”. He equated the “rest” with the highest happiness of man, to be united with God. He said the only way to do this is to rest from our own works, and allow God to work in us. In Calvin’s opinion, because of our corrupt affections, this can only be done by self-denial. He wrote: “But though the completion of this rest cannot be attained in this life, yet we ought ever to strive for it”<sup>18</sup>.

Expositors and commentators from early Methodism and its offshoots, the Salvation Army, the 19<sup>th</sup> century American Holiness Movement, the Pentecostal Holiness Church and others, consider the “rest” to portray the sanctified Christian life in this world. Wesley and his collaborator, John Fletcher, saw the “rest” in this light<sup>19</sup>. Their

theological emphasis was that “entire sanctification” is possible in this life, and the testimonies of many Methodists and Holiness churches bear witness to the profound and abiding sense of joy and freedom in God they experienced when they believed for “entire sanctification”<sup>20</sup>. In this paradigm, sanctification is the necessary pre-requisite to enter the “rest”. It is seen as a gift from God attainable by faith. The “rest” cannot be attained by human effort without God; but the faith required necessitates an entire surrender to the purposes of God, and a diligence and all consuming passion to bring all thoughts into “captivity to Christ” as Paul put it (2 Cor 10:5).

### **The emphasis of Hebrews**

Whereas Paul’s emphasis was wanting his readers to be *right*, or *justified* before God; Luke’s emphasis was *power* from God; the Hebrews author’s concern, perhaps more closely matching John, is that his readers should be clean and perfect before God. This is not a contradiction to other New Testament authors, who also brought out the theme of holiness and sanctification; rather it is complementary to their writing. Moreover the implicit understanding through Hebrews is that this life of holiness is only possible through the action of the Holy Spirit.

### **Appendix – Verses on the Holy Spirit in Hebrews**

#### **1. Hebrews 2:4**

God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy **Ghost**, according to his own will?

**2. Hebrews 3:7**

Wherefore (as the Holy **Ghost** saith, To day if ye will hear his voice,

**3. Hebrews 6:4**

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy **Ghost**,

**4. Hebrews 9:8**

The Holy **Ghost** this signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing:

**5. Hebrews 9:14**

How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal **Spirit** offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

**6. Hebrews 10:15**

Whereof the Holy **Ghost** also is a witness to us: for after that he had said before,

**7. Hebrews 10:29**

Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the **Spirit** of grace?

## **Endnotes / Bibliography**

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<sup>1</sup> Buist M. Fanning; A Theology of Hebrews; In - A Biblical Theology of the New Testament; Ed. Roy B. Zuck; 1994; Moody Press

<sup>2</sup> F.F. Bruce; The Epistle to the Hebrews; The New International Commentary on the New Testament; 1990; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; p 69

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<sup>3</sup> God is cited as author of scripture in Hebrews 1:5; 1:6; 1:8; 1:10; 1:13; 2:12; 4:3; 4:7; 5:5-6; 7:21; 8:7 and 13:5.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce, p 95

<sup>5</sup> J. Sidlow Baxter; Explore the Book; 1960; Zondervan; p 275

<sup>6</sup> Fanning pp 407 - 411

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the Whole Bible; Hebrews 6; available [www.crosswalk.org](http://www.crosswalk.org)

<sup>8</sup> Bruce p 217

<sup>9</sup> Bruce pp 10-14

<sup>10</sup> Clare G Weakley; The Nature of Spiritual Growth; "A modern translation of ten of John Wesley's 'Standard Sermons' as they relate to the Holy Spirit and his works" – Pref; 1977; Bethany House Publishers

<sup>11</sup> Holiness in Hebrews; Wayne C. McCown; Wesley Centre on Line; Wesley Centre for Applied Theology; Northwest Nazarene University; [http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyan\\_theology/theojrnl/16-20/16-13.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyan_theology/theojrnl/16-20/16-13.htm)

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Brown; The Message of Hebrews; The Bible Speaks Today Series; Series Editor John RW Stott; 1982; Inter-Varsity Press; p 179

<sup>13</sup> Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words; 1985; Thomas Nelson

<sup>14</sup> Bruce: translation p 239; explanation pp 243 and 247

<sup>15</sup> Brown; p 90

<sup>16</sup> Bruce; p 103 - 114

<sup>17</sup> Gary de Lashmutt; Hebrews 4:1-16, Entering God's Rest. Article on Xenos website: [www.xenos.org](http://www.xenos.org)

<sup>18</sup> Calvin; Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews; available

<http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/m.sion/calvhebr.htm>

<sup>19</sup> John Fletcher; Pentecost and the Wesleyan Doctrine of Full Sanctification; <http://home.insightbb.com/~larrywood/index2.html> ; Laurence W. Wood, Ph. D.

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<sup>20</sup> T Plumb; How to Enter His Rest; 2005; e-book published on <http://www.enterhisrest.org/>