

Appendix 2 - Interpretations of the Falling Away

Hebrews 6:1-8 as it is usually understood, does not match experience. There are many who have shown every conceivable evidence of genuine salvation, who have then fallen away and subsequently been restored to faith and godliness. Biblical examples are:

David committed murder, deceit and adultery, but repented and was restored.

All the disciples fell away and Peter denied Christ three times.¹ The eleven were restored.

The incestuous man reported in 1Cor 5 was handed over to Satan, but he repented and was restored. (2Cor 2)

Timothy was told to instruct those in the church whom the devil had taken captive in the hope that God would grant them repentance. (2Tim 2:23-26)

Some of the Galatians fell from grace but Paul prayed for their restoration. (Gal 5:4, 4:19)

In attempting to make sense of this passage in the light of experience and at the same time keeping within the constraints of their theological positions, commentators have proposed at least sixteen different interpretations.² I mention most of these below. The interpretation I consider the most persuasive I have argued in the main body of this book and not repeated here.

The author is making a pastoral, not a theological argument

A view taken by many is that in this passage the author *accidentally* presents a theological contradiction in order to make a pastoral appeal. His concern is not to make a theologically watertight statement but a powerfully motivating pastoral warning.

This line of argument is persuasive for many as it circumvents the usual arguments over the passage. The Christian faith contains a number of seemingly conflicting truths that we have to live with, for instance the divinity and humanity of Christ, predestination and man's responsibility, God's sovereignty and man's free will. We can believe these truths, accepting that we are not wise enough to understand them fully. People who take this view say we should not worry about the theological contradiction in this passage.

Firstly, it is hard to believe that the inference concerning the impossibility of restoration for a believer who falls away is *accidental*. The author goes to considerable lengths to illustrate and argue the point. The conflict is not accidental, but is it acceptable? Can we live with it?

The apparent contradiction contained in this passage, and indeed in other scriptures relating to eternal security and perseverance, are of a different nature to the fore mentioned truths. With them, although we cannot *explain* how both truths can hold, it is possible to believe both sides at the same time. But how is it possible to believe in both eternal security and in the possibility of losing one's salvation at the same time? They are opposite sides of one issue. An interpretation must be found that gives *theological* weight to the arguments presented in this passage.

A fallen believer can never be brought back to salvation

Most Armenians take it that a believer who utterly denies Christ loses his salvation and can never be restored. A variation of this is that certain serious sins are beyond forgiveness.

This view requires the loss of one given by the Father to Christ and the annulling of the atonement for that fallen believer – a possibility expressly denied in the Scriptures.

¹ Mk 14:27 "You will all fall away," Jesus told them.

² In compiling this summary I am indebted to Michael Eaton in his book, *A Theology of Encouragement*, p208ff

Restoration is difficult, but not impossible

Some Armenian's say restoration is extremely difficult, rather than impossible. This is not the meaning of the word "impossible" nor does it reflect the strength of a curse.

Restoration is impossible while they rebel

Another Arminian view is that it is impossible to restore someone *while* they rebel. But again this ignores the significance of the oath/curse.

We may not restore them, but God may

Others suggest that a backslidden Christian may not be able to be brought back by us, but they may return by themselves, or by the Holy Spirit's work. Some say it means that teachers in the church cannot restore such a person because they no longer go to church and so will not hear the teaching that could restore them! This does not reflect the meaning of the parable of the fruitless land that follows, where God curses the land.

A believer who abandons obedience to Christ was never truly saved

Some believe the author is talking about Jews who have shared in the believing community but, relying still upon the Law, have not yet come to true saving faith.

Many Calvinist's similarly argue that the author is pointing out how far a person may experience God and yet still not be truly saved. They point to the parable of the seeds and suggest that author is describing people who receive the word with enthusiasm and rapid initial growth, but were never truly saved.

However, this view, expounded by John Owen, leaves everyone vulnerable to the fear that they may not be truly saved, no matter what their experience of God. An additional problem is that if the person described was never saved in the first place, why should it be impossible for them to be truly saved? That would be saying that someone who comes extremely close to salvation, but then backs off can never be saved in the future!

This is a hypothetical situation that never actually happens

Some Calvinists claim the statement is hypothetical, that the author is seeking to correct a wrong belief. In this view the author is saying, "If a person were to fall away they could never be restored! How silly! Stop believing such nonsense. Christians who have experienced all these things never fall away." This view does not match experience. Every year respected Christian leaders fall away, and every year some are restored.

A church may lose its standing

One commentator suggests that the author means a disobedient church may have its fruitfulness barred, as in Rev 2:5. This does not reflect the individual language of the context.

Initial repentance cannot be renewed

Some say it is the initial experience of repentance that cannot be renewed. It is a unique experience that cannot be repeated. They say this does not mean forgiveness cannot be renewed.

Restoration a second time is impossible

Two ancient views were that a person can be renewed after falling away once, but not a second time, or that a second baptism is impossible, since the phrase is literally "renewed *again* to repentance." These views have no New Testament support.

True or faulty faith

The question of whether the people described in this passage are true believers or false believers is of fundamental importance to the range of interpretations open to us, so we will consider this matter in some detail.

Many Calvinist commentators argue that the people described are faulty believers; they are not truly saved; they are people who attend church and claim to have repented and believed and show many signs of true faith, but who nevertheless have a faulty faith. They say that the things mentioned in Hebrews 6:4-5 could be experienced by someone who is not truly saved.³ In contrast, they point to the things mentioned in Hebrews 6:10-12 as being those things which “accompany salvation” (v9). These things mark out a true believer. Let us look at the two lists:

Hebrews 6:4-5	Hebrews 6:10-12
enlightenment	work
tasting the heavenly gift	love
sharing in the Holy Spirit	ministry
tasting the goodness of the word of God	diligence
tasting the powers of the coming age.	full assurance of hope
	faith
	patience
	inheriting the promises

Which of these lists describes a truly saved person? Surely it is the first one. I know of many fine *non*-Christians, let alone faulty-faith Christians, who have most of the qualities of the second list, but I know of no nominal Christians who would sign up to any points in the first. It is quite unreasonable to imagine that the recipients of this letter would have understood the first list as describing false believers and the second as sure marks of true believers.

Even if the first list could describe an unsaved person, (requiring enlightenment to mean only hearing, tasting to mean sampling, sharing in the Holy Spirit to mean recognising His superficial presence, experiencing the powers being perhaps through being healed), there would be no logic in the authors argument. He urges his readers (who he expressly addresses as saved) to prepare for solid food, leave behind the repetition of the basics and move on to maturity. Why in the middle of this would he digress without warning or explanation into a discussion of the fate of false believers?

If we construct a condensed version of the two possibilities we can easily compare their logic:

You ought to be teachers, so move on from the basic doctrines, for it is impossible to bring back to repentance nearly-Christians who fall away. But we are confident of better things for you.

You ought to be teachers, so move on from the basic doctrines, for it is impossible to bring back to repentance immature Christians who fall away. But we are confident of better things for you.

The first version make no sense at all. What has the danger to other nearly-Christians got to do with his Christian readers going on to maturity? And how could he write about nearly-Christians in terms of “bring back to repentance” if they had never truly repented in the first place? He would say “bring to true repentance.” The second version is clearly far more likely.

³ Calvin and John Owen believed this. For a 20th century expression see e.g. Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Other Warning Passages in Hebrews,” in *Still Sovereign* p156ff

The grounds for confidence

Hebrews 6:9 says, “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation.”

Again this touches on major theological divisions. A Calvinist believes that a truly saved believer cannot lose their salvation and will persevere in their faith to their death. They are “confident of better things.” But for the Calvinist who believes that those referred to in verses 4-5 can be barred from salvation, this passage presents a problem. These people have repented (otherwise he would not say “bring back to repentance”) and they have expressed faith in Christ as their saviour (otherwise they would not be crucifying Christ *again*) and they believe themselves to be Christians (otherwise they would not be described as falling away). What more does such a believer have to do for salvation? If these people have faulty faith, who can be sure they have genuine faith? Only a Calvinist would argue that the people described have faulty faith but they have nothing to say to such a person to ensure their faith is genuine. For a Calvinist there is nothing to be added to our faith. Salvation is by faith alone. So in the light of verses 4-5, if these are taken to indicate the barring of an apparent believer (who falls away) from salvation, then who can have confidence of better things for themselves, let alone for others?

An Arminian also has a problem with this text. He believes that a truly saved person can fall away and no longer be saved. They may be hopeful of “better things”, but cannot usually be confident. Some Arminians accept that a person can receive an assurance from God that they will not fall away. Such a person can then have assurance of salvation and be “confident of better things” for themselves, but one could hardly express confidence that others would go on to better things.

Both of these interpretations struggle to make sense of the passage. I believe the Calvinist is right to have confidence in the enduring saving grace and power of Christ to both win us and keep us in salvation (more on this as we go on). But I cannot accept the torturing of this passage to say that those who fall away are not genuinely saved. The solution to the apparent conundrum is not to say that those who fall away are not truly saved, but to observe (as I argued above) that we are not told they lose their salvation.

Conclusion

I think the argument that the people described are truly saved believers is persuasive and should govern our interpretation of the passage. I am also persuaded that the author of the letter to the Hebrews, in line with the rest of the New Testament authors, teach that justification of a believer through faith is a gift of God that is never retracted. Eternal life, once given, is a secure gift. None of the interpretations given above give adequate weight to the passage itself or the wider witness of scripture.