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Felix H. Cortez

Andrews University, fcortez@andrews.edu

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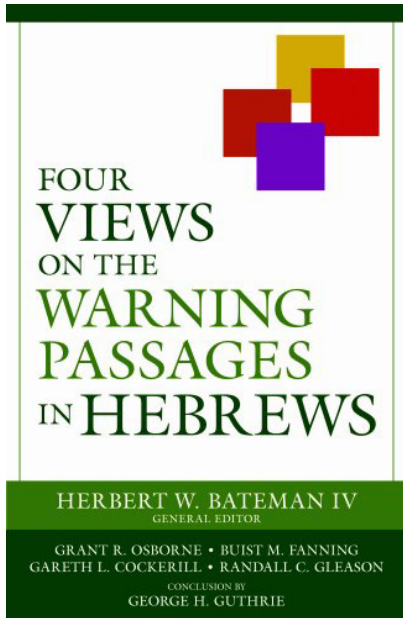
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Bateman, Herbert W., IV, ed.

Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews

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Felix H. Cortez
Universidad de Montemorelos
Montemorelos, Nuevo León, Mexico

Among the subjects of theological reflection, “finding the balance between the sovereignty of God and the free will of humankind” is probably one of the most difficult (86). The issue first came to prominence in the Pelagian controversy of the first half of the fifth century C.E. that opposed Pelagius and Augustine.¹ Although Pelagian views were condemned by the third ecumenical council at Ephesus in 431, the controversy did not die but evolved.² After nearly sixteen hundred years of speculation, the discussion has coalesced into two competing schools of thought: the followers of Calvin (Reformed view); and the followers of Arminius. Both agree that humans are totally depraved—that

1. Pelagius stressed the free will of humans and their ability to take the initial steps toward salvation apart from special grace. Augustine emphasized the absolute necessity of God’s interior grace for the salvation of humans as well as God’s predestination of both those who are saved and those who are lost. See B. L. Shelley, “Pelagius, Pelagianism,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 833; N. L. Geisler, “Augustine of Hippo,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 106.

2. Its underlying principles and tendencies reappeared in various modifications throughout the history of the church. The Gottschalk controversy in the ninth century, the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the synergistic in the Lutheran church, the Arminian in the Reformed, and the Jansenistic in the Roman Catholic all “reproduce the same great contest in new and specific aspects” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 3:§146).

is, none would choose Christ if given the choice. They disagree, however, on the solution to the dilemma (“can anyone ever be saved?” [86]). The Calvinist believes that God acts sovereignly on the basis of his mysterious will and elects some for salvation. God overwhelms the elect with his irresistible grace so that they choose Christ. In the same way, he keeps the elect from falling so that they are eternally secure. On the other hand, the Arminian holds that God acts sovereignly but sends his Spirit, who convicts every person and overcomes one’s total depravity so that one makes a choice. Through foreknowledge, God knows who will choose Christ but does not force one to do so. After choosing Christ, the person also needs to decide whether to let the Spirit work or live in him or her. Thus, believers are able to backslide or actively repudiate Christ (for a more complete description of both positions, see 86–87). *Four Views on the Warning Passages of Hebrews* provides the reader with the exciting opportunity to observe the face-off of these two schools of thought in probably the most intriguing textual arena: the warning passages of Hebrews.³

From a biblical perspective, the warnings in Hebrews against apostasy are an indispensable element of the Reformed-Arminian debate. Its clear—and sometimes harsh—admonitions against forsaking Christ force the Calvinist to address the issue of the eternal security of believers (172): “if they are true believers eternally secure in their salvation, how do we account for the apparent danger of these believers ‘rejecting’ God’s Son and the subsequent danger of incurring God’s punishment?” (25). Its stringent language poses a challenge to Wesleyan Arminians as well, who believe that “those who fall from saving faith may be restored” (257): Do the warning passages mean that there is “no restoration for a backslidden believer?” (back cover).

Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews comprises a collection of papers originally presented to the Hebrews Study Group during the fifty-sixth annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (17–19 November 2004). Its contributors are internationally known biblical scholars, all of whom have previously published articles in academic journals or commentaries on Hebrews (for a description of the contributors, see 11–13). Reading the book is like attending the original debate. Its organization is clear and simple. Each contributor has the opportunity to present his interpretation, after which the other scholars respond critically. The high quality of the contributions left me wanting more. The tone of the debate is gracious but intense and confrontational at times. The general editor, Herbert W. Bateman IV, does a good job of setting the stage for a fair exchange of ideas. His introduction identifies the warning passages as an agreement

3. The contributors and their perspectives are the following: Grant R. Osborne (Classical Arminian), Buist M. Fanning (Classical Reformed), Gareth Lee Cockerill (Wesleyan Arminian), and Randall C. Gleason (Moderate Reformed).

of sorts of the textual battlefield: Heb 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; 12:14–29. It also includes a studied survey of these passages from a neutral perspective in which he acquaints the readers with the interpretive challenges that confront the contributors. Finally, George H. Guthrie provides a fitting conclusion in which he reflects on the manner of the debate, hermeneutics, and the practice of theology. The text is well written in an accessible style and provides indices of authors, Greek words, Scripture passages, and subjects that greatly facilitate access to the information in the book.

Given the theological presuppositions that shape the debate, I will evaluate *Four Views on the Warning Passages of Hebrews* from a matrix of three fundamental questions around which the discussion gravitates: (1) Are the warnings of Hebrews delivered to true, regenerate Christians? (2) What is the nature of the apostasy against which the author of Hebrews warns? (3) What loss exactly is to be feared? It is my hope that this approach will help readers of this review—whatever their persuasion—to assess the impact of different hermeneutical perspectives in the differing exegetical analyses that comprise this work.

First, are the warnings of Hebrews delivered to true, regenerate Christians? Herbert W. Bateman IV asserts in the introduction that all the contributors coincide in that Hebrews addresses true believers (24). This is true only to some extent. Grant R. Osborne (89–90), Gareth Lee Cockerill (276), and Randall C. Gleason (157) agree that the warnings are delivered to true, regenerated believers. Osborne devotes a significant portion of his contribution to this issue (111–14). He concludes that the portrayal of their past Christian experience (esp. 6:4–8) is too powerful not to refer to regenerated Christians.

Buist M. Fanning disagrees, arguing that the description of the readers' experience in passages such as 6:4–8 does not intend to predicate the authenticity of their spiritual experience. Instead, the author of Hebrews "addresses all the readers together in a charitable and pastoral way as Christians, since this is how they have identified themselves by associating with the Christian community. On this basis he also identifies himself with them in his concern as a Christian pastor" (133). Thus, Hebrews' portrayal of the Christian experience of the readers does not define their true spiritual status but is only in agreement with their outward confession.

Second, what is the nature of the apostasy against which the author of Hebrews warns? Here we find a greater diversity of opinions. Osborne believes that the author is worried about two kinds of spiritual danger among the recipients. Some are drifting away (e.g., 2:1–4; 3:7–4:11). These are "backslidden" Christians who have lost their moorings and need to get serious once more" (92–93). Others are in danger of actively repudiating Christ (6:4–8; 10:26–31; 12:15–17). These Christians are warned against becoming apostates who have an ongoing attitude of studied contempt for things Christian (115,

122–23). The first can be restored to faith, but the latter have committed the unpardonable sin (87).

Cockerill holds a position similar to that of Osborne (275, 282–83, 285–86). He does not see, however, two kinds of dangers among the recipients but a continuum; that is to say, “Hebrews warns against a ‘drifting away’ that *may lead* to an ‘active repudiation’” of Christ (145, emphasis added).

Fanning holds a position similar to that of Cockerill and Osborne (180–86). He affirms with them that Hebrews warns Christians against a total, final rejection of Christ from which there is no possibility of recovery. He further argues, however, that a “straightforward” reading of the warning passages of Hebrews and the wider context leads to a contradiction. Hebrews also teaches God’s faithfulness and the eternal intercession of Christ that guarantee the final perseverance of believers (192–205). There is, then, both a stress on the eternal nature and effects of Christ’s intercession on behalf of believers and a warning against falling into eternal condemnation (175–205). He suggests that the conditional statements of Heb 3:6 and 14 provide the key to this dilemma: they affirm that enduring faith is the evidence of genuine salvation—not its cause or condition for maintaining it (206–18). Thus, repudiation of Christ does not cause the loss of salvation but merely evidences that participation in it was apparent and superficial (206–18). In this sense, believers cannot really fall, but the warnings are given to urge believers to maintain their faith in Christ’s high-priestly work (218). Therefore, in the end, the warnings of Hebrews are only hypothetical in nature (225, 232).

Gleason defines apostasy in completely different terms. A very important aspect of his exegesis is the exodus imagery he finds in 2:2–3; 6:4; 10:26–31; and 12:18–21. From this he concludes that the true danger of believers was not apostasy but a deliberate choice to remain immature (343–60; see also 379).

Third, what loss exactly is to be feared? Osborne, Fanning (186–90), and Cockerill (267–72) agree that warnings are about the loss of eternal salvation. An important part of their arguments is the author’s use of the *qal wahomer* (“light to weighty” or “lesser to greater”) reasoning to describe the greater salvation offered by Jesus and the more severe punishment for those who reject it (e.g., 2:2–3; 10:28–29; 12:25). They conclude that the eternal nature of the salvation rejected requires a punishment of eternal nature (92–94, 101, 120–22, 125–27). Note, however, that for Fanning the warnings are not intended “to provoke fear that they may lose their standing with God, nor primarily to test the genuineness of their faith” (218) because—as shown above—they cannot really apostatize. Instead, it is part of a pastoral—and finally God’s—strategy to urge readers to maintain their faith.

Gleason argues that readers are “in danger of forfeiting covenant blessings and of undergoing the physical discipline of God while escaping final judgment” (344). The exodus generation did not suffer eternal but only temporary loss. This is evidenced in the fact that Moses and Aaron suffered punishment together with the exodus generation but did not suffer eternal loss. This is so because their apostasy was not a complete turning away from all belief in God (354). He sees in Heb 6:4–8 the description of the experience of the exodus generation in their wandering through the desert. God was not unwilling to forgive the generation but denied them the blessing of rest in the land in order to discipline them in the wilderness (356; see Num 14:20). Likewise, believers who “fall away” from God will be denied repentance and, thus, covenant blessings. The purpose of this is that they go through divine discipline (356). Their judgment, then, like that of the wilderness generation, is only of physical nature (360–67). The author had suggested at the beginning of his contribution that Hebrews was written mainly to Jewish believers in Palestine not far from Jerusalem before 70 C.E. (337–40). This is important to him because it makes it possible for him to propose a historical understanding of the warning of Hebrews. He suggests that we should understand “the author’s warnings in light of the coming Roman invasion of Palestine that would soon bring an end to the temple sacrifices (8:13) and the destruction of Jerusalem (13:44). If so, he [the author of Hebrews] could be warning his readers of physical harm or even death if they seek refuge in Judaism and its link to Jewish nationalism” (361; see 360–67).

Beyond emphasizing the outcome of the debate in my view,⁴ I want to stress the achievements of this book. *Four Views on the Warning Passages of Hebrews* is an outstanding contribution to the ongoing debate. As far as I know, a work of this nature is unprecedented in the history of the scholarship of Hebrews. Its authors engage the topic from diverse theological perspectives and produce clear exegetical arguments. The book presents an informed and faithful picture of the current debate and, in some cases, throws new light on it. Whether one is a student of Hebrews or of biblical hermeneutics,⁵ the book is a pleasure to read.

4. I found myself agreeing mostly with the readings of Osborne and Cockerill. I consider Gleason’s views unlikely. Fanning’s contribution was the one I most enjoyed, but I finally remained unconvinced. After considerable struggle I came to agree with Osborne’s critique that his understanding of the warning passages “in effect becomes a nuanced type of the hypothetical view” (232) because it warns about something that cannot happen.

5 See William W. Klein, “Exegetical Rigor with Hermeneutical Humility: The Calvinist-Arminian Debate and the New Testament,” in *New Testament Greek and Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Gerald F. Hawthorne* (ed. Amy M. Donaldson and Timothy B. Sailors; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 23–36.