

Having given his audience a disciplinary warning, *Hebrews* now adds a salutary word of encouragement. Couched in his message is the central purpose of the whole letter. He wanted them to carry on to the end so that they might inherit the promises of God without becoming sluggish or failing in faith (vss.11-12).

They were capable of better things and *Hebrews* was confident that they could achieve them. Their witness of loving service to the saints had been salutary so far, despite some slacking off he had just warned them about. He urged them to continue their exemplary ministry despite their present doubts. By patiently imitating the way others had gone before them and now had inherited the promises of God, they would attain the same goal.

Who were “the saints” about which this writer was writing? Was it a segment of their congregation who were Gentiles and did not maintain strict adherence to all the minutiae of the Jewish cult, their dietary code or circumcision, perhaps?

Acts 15, possibly written about the same time, gives some insight into the compromise that Luke felt were necessary following the ejection of Jewish Christians from the strictly Jewish synagogues circa 85 CE. Were the Jewish Christians in the congregation to which *Hebrews* was addressed representative of those Jews who were sorely troubled by their exclusion from their familiar worship environment?

In his latest book, *Re-Claiming The Bible For A Non-Religious World*, John Shelby Spong has this perceptive note about *Hebrews*:

Growth always marginalizes the original members of a particular tradition, who feel left behind and thus not part of the present consensus. The recipients of the book of

Hebrews appear to have felt that they no longer fitted into what Christianity was becoming. They were beginning to pull away from their Christian convictions and were even, it appears, tempted to return to the Judaism of their childhood. The author of this book sought to dissuade them from this step by attempting to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity to traditional Judaism. (HarperOne, 2011, 369)

Clever persuader that he was, the author takes his Jewish audience back to their religious roots in the promises made by God to Abraham. He shows how that revelation of God’s saving purpose has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ (6:13-20). They are heirs of those promises and can depend utterly on the unchangeable character of God’s purpose. That is the anchor for their souls and can take courage in their hope.

In an effort to be even more persuasive, *Hebrews* links the faith of his audience to the traditional Jewish celebration of Yom Kippur, the Feast of Atonement. That was the one day of the year when the high priest went “behind the curtain” that separated the worshipping congregation from the Holy of Holies. In the tabernacle in the wilderness during the long trek to the Promised Land, the Holy of Holies was the place where the Ark of the Covenant with its tablets of the Commandments represented the presence of God dwelling among God’s people.

For these Jewish Christians this image served as a link to Jesus’ death and resurrection. This was the means by which he entered into the eternal mystery of life in the presence of God. He was the forerunner of all who believed in him and so serving as the great high priest “after the order of Melchizedek.”

This latter phrase sets up the next and central section of the book.

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, free me from sluggishness and complacency that I may love and serve you zealously and persevere in faithfulness to the end. AMEN.

(Don Schwager. *Letter to the Hebrews: A Commentary and Meditation*)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How helpful is it for any congregation to be given a disciplinary warning followed at once by words of encouragement?
2. What hero of faith other than Jesus would you place instead of Abraham as examples of perseverance to be followed? Explain briefly why you chose that person.
3. What do you make of Spong's view that "growth always marginalizes the original members of particular tradition?"
4. One commentator wrote of *Hebrews* being a pastoral letter. Based on this selection, how do you rate it as an exemplary instance of this type of communication for a modern congregation?

CLOSING PRAYER

Go before us, O Lord, with your most gracious favour, and further us with your continual help, that all our doing, begun, continued and ended in you, may to the glory of your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

8 – A NOTE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Hebrews 6:9-20

Underneath the time-bound and time-warped words of the Bible, I still find in the words of this book a sense that all life is holy, that all life is loved and that each of us is called to all that we are capable of being. Those are the biblical themes that I hope our world never loses.

I close this volume with the words that best capture my understanding of Jesus and remain today my favourite text of all. These words come from John's gospel (10:10): "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." Love which breaks down all barriers and separation and enhances all that we are is the life power that I find in Jesus. That is why I assert in Paul's words that "God" was in Jesus, and that is why he is and remains Christ for me.

Shalom!

John Shelby Spong. *Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World*. HarperOne 2011, 209.