

Christian Foundations

Getting it wrong

Introduction

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. Heb 6:1-3

It is common amongst Charismatic churches to use this passage to explain the foundations of the Christian life. Indeed, it forms the basis for many commitment courses and discipleship programmes. Some have even written books based upon this as primers for young converts.¹

One of the main reasons that Charismatics do this is because the word 'baptism' is in the plural; this is then used as a basis for demanding two baptisms: one in water and one in the Holy Spirit.

This is contrary to Scripture:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Eph 4:4-5

There is one baptism and that is the baptism of the believer into Christ (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27). Water baptism is an external symbol of this inner truth, a sign to the individual and the world that a person is baptised into Christ. Baptism into Christ includes a baptism into his death and thus his resurrected life (Rm 6:3-5).

But is this passage not 'the elementary principles of Christ'? If so, then what does this passage actually teach?

The purpose of the Book of Hebrews

Context is always vital in understanding Scripture, and so it is here.

The purpose of the writer is very specific; it is to exhort Hebrew Christians to focus upon Christ instead of being tempted to go back to the Law of Moses and Judaism as it was then (Judaism is different today).²

These Jewish believers were being assailed (as were the Galatian Christians) by Judaisers who were trying to get Christian converts, especially Jewish converts, to follow the Mosaic Law. Paul's ministry was constantly attacked by such Judaisers and his writing was very strong in contending with these heretics (e.g. Gal 5:12; Phil 3:2; 1 Thess 2:14-15).

¹ E.g. Derek Prince; 'The Spirit-Filled Believer's Handbook'.

² Modern Judaism is not based on the Law of Moses (Torah) but on the Babylonian Talmud.

Thus Hebrews makes strong arguments that Jesus is greater than angels, greater than Moses, greater than Jewish High Priests, greater than the Law, and greater than the Tabernacle. The readers are constantly urged to press on, be diligent (Heb 4:1, 4:11, 6:11), go on (Heb 6:2) and not fall back (Heb 10:38-39) into Judaism.

The point of Hebrews 6:1-3

As part of the writer's overall objective to get these Hebrew believers to move on in Christ and turn away from trying to fulfil the Mosaic Law, he exhorts them to move away from the first principles of Christ. He then lists these elementary doctrines of introduction to the Christ (Messiah).

These first principles are the ideas in the Law about the coming Messiah and the preparatory worship before the Messiah came. They are not the fundamental basis of Christian doctrine at all but the elementary preparations that existed before the appearance of the Messiah.

Hebrews six does not lay out the vital principles of the Gospel. It does not mention any of these fundamental issues:

- Total Depravity.
- Conviction of sin.
- Redemption.
- Propitiation.
- Justification.
- Adoption.
- Substitutionary sacrifice.
- Penal atonement.
- Union with Christ.
- The New Covenant.
- The end of the law.
- Election and predestination.
- Calling.
- Irresistible grace.
- The work of the Spirit.
- Life in the Spirit.
- Sanctification.
- Dying with Christ.
- Being raised with Christ.
- Final perseverance.
- Assurance of eternal life.

Instead the list mentions the features of living under the Old Covenant:

- Repentance from dead works.
- Faith toward God.
- Baptisms, or ablutions (washings).
- Laying on of hands.

- Resurrection of the dead.
- Eternal judgment.

These are prime factors in Old Covenant religion, not New Covenant religion.

Why use Hebrews for basic doctrinal principles?

Hebrews is a polemic and apologetic letter of exhortation. It is centred on attacking the idea of returning to the Jewish law and defending the superiority of Christ over all that came before. He is the fulness of what the law pointed towards.

As such, Hebrews is not a suitable letter from which to draw ideas of the fundamental principles of Christian doctrine. A much better source for that would be the book of Romans, whose purpose is to lay out exactly that – the fundamentals of the Gospel.

Exegesis

Context

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Heb 5:12-14

These Hebrew Christians were behind in learning because they had fallen back into centring on Old Covenant Mosaic Law. They needed to understand again the first principles of Christian doctrine. What follows are not those first principles of doctrine but what they needed to leave behind.

The principles

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, NKJV

Wherefore, having left the word of the beginning of the Christ, YLT [Young's Literal Translation]

Dio. avfe,ntej to.n th/j avrch/j tou/ Cristou/ lo,gon NT Greek

'Therefore, leaving the of the beginning of the Christ word (subject).' Word for word translation

Leaving the elementary. The list here is what they needed to abandon because they were principles that applied under the Old Covenant. The elementaries or beginnings of Christ refers to the preparation for the Messiah under the Old Covenant.

The final preparation for the Messiah was finalised by John the Baptist who was the last of the OT prophets (Matt 11:13; Lk 16:16). His message centred on repentance from dead works and baptism in water as an indicator of true faith as far as was possible under the Mosaic Law. He did not represent the Gospel of the Kingdom as proclaimed by Christ (Matt 4:23, 9:35). This is why he told his disciples to go to Christ when he appeared because he could not lead them into eternal life, he could only point to Christ.

Now **after** John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God. Mk 1:14

The six particulars here specified had been, as it were, the Christian Catechism of the Old Testament; and such Jews who had begun to recognise Jesus as the Christ immediately on the new light being shed on these fundamental particulars, were accounted as having the elementary principles of the doctrine of Christ.

John Bengel, Gnomon.

The first and most obvious elementary instruction of Jews would be the teaching them the typical significance of their own ceremonial law in its Christian fulfilment.

Henry Alford, Greek NT.

Let us go on to perfection, NKJV

Unto the perfection we may advance. YLT

evpi. th.n teleio,thta ferw,meqa(

‘To the perfection let us be moved.’

Again the writer exhorts the Hebrews to go on to perfection – which is Christ. They needed to leave the Mosaic Law which was temporary (Gal 3:19) and focus upon Christ, the perfection of what the Law promised.

Not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, NKJV

Not again a foundation laying of reformation from dead works. YLT

mh. pa,lin qeme,lion kataballo,menoi metanoi,aj avpo. nekrw/n e;rgwn

‘Not again a foundation laying down of repentance from dead works,’

This emphasises what must be left behind, not going back to the foundations of the Old Covenant, not centring upon repentance under the law, not focusing upon dead works of the law.

And of faith toward God, NKJV

And of faith on God. YLT

kai. pi,stewj evpi. qeo,n(

‘And of faith toward God.’

The basis of divine acceptance under the law was the faith of the believer in the power of God to accept the offerings of the Levitical system as a sign of faith in the real deliverer that would come, the Messiah.

Of the doctrine of baptisms, NKJV

Of the teaching of baptisms, YLT

baptismw/n didach/j(

‘Of baptisms of teaching.’

This is another reference to Old Covenant religion, which had many ablutions and washings. The priests were ceremonially washed, the sacrificial offerings were washed, the Tabernacle had a laver where feet were constantly washed; the Levitical system was riddled with washings.

It cannot refer to Christian baptism since it is in the plural and in Christ there is only one baptism (Eph 4:5).

However, the choice of word makes this certain.

‘Baptisms’ here is the Greek word *baptismos*. This is never used of Christian baptism in the NT.³ *Baptisma* is used for Christian baptism.

Compare:

- Heb 9:10, ‘concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings [*baptismos*], and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation’.
- Mk 7:4, ‘When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing [*baptismos*] of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches’.
- Mk 7:8, ‘For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men -- the washing [*baptismos*] of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do’.

A key reason why Charismatic churches use this passage as the basis of their discipleship course is that they use the plural *baptismos* to refer to Christian water baptism plus the Charismatic novelty of the ‘baptism in the Spirit’, instead of relating it to Jewish ablutions. This is spurious.

βαπτισμός only here, Heb 9:10, and Mar 7:4. The common form is βάπτισμα. Neither word in lxx or Class. The meaning here is *lustral rites in general*.

MR Vincent; *Word Studies in the NT*.

baptismo,j [is] related to ceremonial rites of purification by the use of water *an act of dipping, immersion*; (1) of an inanimate obj. *washing* (MK 7.4).

Friberg’s Greek Lexicon.

³ The Alexandrian text has it in Col 2:12, but this is an error; it is not in the Byzantine text, which has *baptisma*.

baptismo,j, ou/ ritual washing, ablution, baptism; washing (of hands).
UBS Greek Dictionary.

baptismo,j *baptismos* {bap-tis-mos'} 1) a washing, purification effected by means of water 1a) of washing prescribed by the Mosaic law (Heb 9:10) which seems to mean an exposition of the difference between the washings prescribed by the Mosaic law and Christian baptism .
Thayer Greek Lexicon.

baptismo,j, ou/ *m*: to wash (in some contexts, possibly by dipping into water), with a view to making objects ritually acceptable - 'to wash, to purify, washing, purification. ... There is some doubt as to the precise extent to which *bapti,zw*, *katabapti,zw*, and *baptismo,j* in Mk 7.4 involve ritual cleansing, but the context would seem to imply this, particularly in view of the relationship of such washing to the rules followed by Jews in general and Pharisees in particular.
Louw-Nida Lexicon

The plural *baptismwn* "by itself does not mean specifically Christian baptism either in this epistle (9:10) or elsewhere (Mr 7:4), but ablutions or immersions such as the mystery religions and the Jewish cultus required for initiates, proselytes, and worshippers in general" (Moffatt). The disciples of the Baptist had disputes with the Jews over purification (Joh 3:25). See also Ac 19:2.
Robertson's Word Pictures.

[*The doctrine of baptisms*] Rather 'of ablutions' ... because *baptismos* is never used of Christian baptism, but only *baptisma*.
FW Farrar; *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, ed. JS Perowne (1891).

I am inclined to think that all the terms in this verse, as well as those in the former, belong to the Levitical law, and are to be explained on that ground.
Baptisms, or immersions of the body in water, sprinklings, and washings, were frequent as religious rites among the Hebrews.
Adam Clarke; *Comm, on the Bible*.

Since there is but one baptism ... it is best to interpret this of the divers baptisms among the Jews, spoken of in Heb 9:10 which had a doctrine in them, to that people; teaching them the cleansing virtue of the blood of Christ, and leading them to it, to wash in for sin, and for uncleanness; but now, since this blood was shed, they were no more to teach nor learn the doctrine of cleansing by the blood of Christ this way; nor any more to be led unto it through these divers baptisms, ablutions, and purifications.
John Gill; *Comm, on the Bible*.

The Greek noun that occurs here is not used elsewhere in the NT for the sacrament of baptism. ... on every occasion where baptism is mentioned it is the singular, not the plural, noun that is employed.
PE Hughes, *A Commentary of the Epistle to the Hebrews*.

Note that Derek Prince's popular book on discipleship, 'The Spirit-filled believer's handbook' referring to this passage, spends pages talking about the words *bapto* ('dip') and *baptizo* ('baptise') to suit his agenda but never tells his readers that the word in this text is the word for ablutions (*baptismos*) or that Christian baptism in water is *baptisma*. Now since he claims to be a Greek scholar and analyses *bapto* and *baptismos* at length, he must have known that the word in Heb 6 refers to Hebrew ablutions. This is but one example of deliberately falsifying the text to follow a prior agenda. It is deceptive false teaching.⁴

Of laying on of hands, NKJV

Of laying on also of hands. YLT

evpiqe,sew,j te ceirw/n(

'Of laying on and of hands'

Laying on of hands was also very common in Levitical worship. Every time an offerer brought an offering to a priest he laid his hands on it to represent identification, then the animal died in his place (pointing to Christ's substitutionary atonement). It was also a sign of blessing (Matt 19:13), of healing (Mk 7:32), of separation for a special task (Acts 13:3), in ordination (1 Tim 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6) and so on.

Again Charismatics latch on to this phrase because they highlight the laying on of hands as necessary in bringing healing and especially for imparting spiritual gifts, such as the gift of tongues. This action cements authoritarian principles in Charismatic churches where leaders frequently lay hands on subjects to pass on power.

Of resurrection of the dead, NKJV

Of rising again also of the dead. YLT

avnasta,sew,j te nekrw/n(

'Of resurrection and of dead.'

The Jews under the Old Covenant had the hope of resurrection always before them. The various rituals of the worship system pointed to a future hope in a new world, as Abraham had clearly demonstrated (Heb 11:10).

⁴ In his discussion of the Greek he also makes false claims. After showing that *bapto* and *baptizo* mean to dip he claims that the meaning is 'dipping something into a fluid and then taking it out again' (p177). Even his own classical references show that it means to submerge but not necessarily to rise out again. Thus ships sunk in the sea or people drowned were said to be baptised. Prince even quotes some of these cases. He has added the meaning 'and then taking it out again'. This is appalling exegesis; in fact, it is eisegesis, putting your words into the text.

And of eternal judgment. NKJV

And of judgment age-during. YLT

kai. kri,matoj aivwni,ouÅ

‘And of judgment eternal.’

This was also a central feature of Jewish religion. The constant sacrifices pointed toward divine judgment and condemnation for sin. Blood had to be shed to propitiate a just God.

Conclusion

There is no doubt; it is a serious error to use this passage as a basis for the foundations of Christian doctrine. The passage refers to the elementary principles of the Jewish Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law, which was a preparation for the coming Messiah who would lead disciples into truth.

The hijacking of this passage by Charismatics is a deception. It strives to use Bible verses to substantiate their erroneous practices by twisting the meaning of the verses and the message of the writer in order to support their modern heresies.

Churches wanting to develop a discipleship course should not use this passage as a basis, but rather list the fundamental doctrines gleaned from the whole NT, or alternatively, list the key points that Paul argues for in the book of Romans (i.e. sin, law, judgment, justification by faith, calling, righteousness, sanctification, deliverance from legalism, life in the Spirit, election / predestination, perseverance, and glorification).

It is astonishing to me that, in order to bolster their errors (such as baptism in the Spirit), Charismatics formulate discipleship courses based on this Old Covenant list and ignore hugely important fundamental issues for the young convert, such as: substitutionary atonement, assurance, election, justification by faith, sanctification and so on (see my paper, ‘Basic Discipling’). This is the level of poor teaching found in Charismatic circles that ruins believers.

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