

# Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

July/August 2001

Issue Number 65

## GREATER WORKS THAN THESE

BY BOB DEWAAY

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:12,13)*

A popular “revival movement” claims that latter day apostles and prophets will fulfill this promise in John by doing greater miracles than Jesus did, both in quantity and quality. Their claim is that a new wave of apostolic power will transform everything from church to society and Christianize the world before the return of Christ. Some suppose that this has not happened in the past because of unbelief and neglect on the part of the professing church. Others claim that this apostolic revival is already underway,<sup>1</sup> reasoning that if the world saw even greater miracles than Jesus performed, the masses would repent and turn to God. These “greater miracles” will supposedly prove that restored apostles and prophets have come to set the church straight and thus transform the world.

In this article I will examine the passages in John in their context and show that, properly interpreted, they do not substantiate the claims being made by this modern apostolic movement. Christ is unique in authority and power, being God incarnate. His chosen apostles who were used by the Holy Spirit to write the New Testament have no successors, not now, not ever.

### THE CONTEXT OF JOHN 14

The setting for John 14 is Christ’s soon departure from the world. Jesus had just washed the disciples feet, Judas had headed out to betray him, Peter’s denial of Christ had been predicted, and Jesus had told them He was going where they could not follow until later (all in John

13). Jesus was preparing them for the imminent horrific events that would temporarily dash their Messianic hopes. Though told repeatedly that the Son of Man must die, they still did not comprehend. Jesus was about to be “glorified” (John 13:31,32 which in John meant “crucified”). The multitudes that had eagerly followed Him would soon call for His crucifixion.

When Jesus said to them, “*Let not your heart be troubled*” (John 14:1a), He was describing their present state of mind and calling for a change. Leon Morris literally translates this as, “stop being troubled,”<sup>2</sup> which agrees with the Greek. The entire discourse recorded in John chapters 14-16 is to prepare the disciples for the radically changed situation they would soon experience after His death, resurrection, and ascension. They were being comforted and admonished. As hard as it was for them to comprehend, it was good for them that Jesus was departing: “*But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you*” (John 16:6,7). God’s purposes required that Jesus depart, then send His Holy Spirit to accomplish His purposes through the disciples.

The first two promises given for their hope and comfort were a place in heaven (John 14:2) and Christ’s return (John 14:3). In this same chapter He promised, “*I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you*” (John 14:18). Obviously, what weighed heavily on

their minds was that the comfort of the physical presence of Jesus was going to be taken away from them.

Jesus emphasized throughout this section His ongoing relationship with them: the vine and the branches (John 15:1-8), the promised coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell them (John 14:16,17), and the promise that they could ask in His name (John 14:13,14; 15:16; 16:23,24; 16:26). We should ask, “Why the repetition and why in this context?” The answer is the comfort of Jesus’ physical presence and their ability to ask Him for help. They were concerned that when He departed they would no longer have His help. Jesus was allaying these fears by telling them that not only would they still have access to Him and His intervention, but to the Father’s as well. As we shall see, the promise of answered prayer is not a *carte blanche* power to get what they wanted, but an opportunity to continue their relationship of dependence upon Him. People did not get everything they wanted when they asked Jesus in person (like the request for Him to be king, the request to sit on the right and the left, etc.).

The disciples had these promises: a place in heaven, an ongoing spiritual relationship with Christ, access to Him in prayer, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the continuance of His mighty works, that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth (John 16:13), and His future return. All of these were offered as comfort to their troubled hearts. Things were going to radically change for them, but it would be for the better. God was going to accomplish His Messianic purposes not just in spite of the fact that Jesus would be rejected and crucified, but because of and through His death, resurrection and ascension. This they could not yet grasp. They would be even more troubled in the near future: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you*

will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned to joy" (**John 16:20**). Their sorrow would be temporary and God had a redemptive purpose for it.

The passages under consideration in this article (**John 14:12,13**) must be understood in this context. Jesus is preparing His disciples for the radical change they will encounter when He departs. He is showing them that God's purposes of bringing glory to His own name through the glorification of His Son are at work in all of this. Let us now consider greater works and asking in His name.

### WORKS AND GREATER WORKS

Jesus made the following promise as He prepared his disciples for His departure: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father" (**John 14:12**). Before we discuss the meaning of "works" and "greater works" in this verse, we should consider the significance of works in the Gospel of John. The previous verse tells us the key purpose of works: "Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves" (**John 14:11**). The works that Jesus performed were to lead us to faith in Him as being God incarnate. We are to believe that He is one in essence with the Father. Jesus states this elsewhere in John: "But the witness which I have is greater than that of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me" (**John 5:36**). The works bear witness to the person and mission of Christ. This must be kept in mind as we contemplate the "works and greater works" of **John 14:12**.

The ones who do the works are believers in general: "he who believes in Me." This promise is not restricted to a special class of elite Christians or latter day apostles. This is an important consideration. The purpose of the works is to lead people to faith in Christ. Many mistakenly think that their purpose is to validate the person doing them. We are called to go to a special meeting to hear a great "miracle worker" and find relief from various afflictions.

Testimonies of those who have been healed are used to promote the healer. This is not at all the purpose of signs and works of God in the Bible. The contention being made by Christ and His apostles was that He was God Incarnate, the promised Jewish Messiah, and that **only** He could bring us to the Father (**John 14:6**). John was called the greatest prophet (**Matthew 11:9-11**) yet he did no miraculous works (**John 10:41**). John bore witness to Christ through his preaching and fulfilled God's purposes. It was John the Baptist who said: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (**John 3:30**). The purpose of the works was not to make great the fame and fortune of the prophet, but to bear witness to the person and work of Christ.

The "works" mentioned in the first half of **John 14:12** are supernatural works such as healings. The disciples had already been sent out to heal the sick (**Matthew 10:1**). So the promise is that following Christ's ascension these works would continue, not only through the disciples, but through believers in general. The book of Acts shows that this happened. The purpose of such works is to lead people to saving faith in Christ. For example, on the occasion of the healing of the man at the gate Beautiful (**Acts 3**), Peter preached the death and resurrection of Christ (**Acts 3:15**). When persecution came because of this incident the Jewish authorities forbade preaching Christ, not doing healing! (**Acts 4:18**). They realized that the message of the cross was the real threat. The healing merely created an opportunity for preaching it. Any valid works that are done through believers must point to the truth of the gospel, or they are not the type of works which Christ promised in **John 14:12**.

It should also be kept in mind that the purposes of God, not the will of man, determines when and if such works happen. For example earlier in John we read this: "Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.' They said therefore to Him, 'What then do You do for a sign, that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform?'" (**John 6:29,30**). Jesus had already multiplied the bread and walked on water in John 6. He called for faith in Himself,

but now the people ask for another work. Jesus went on to tell them of His flesh and blood for the life of the world. They rejected Him. God will not do signs on demand. In **Matthew 12:38,39** some Jewish leaders demanded a sign and Jesus refused, saying only the sign of Jonah (signifying Christ's death and resurrection) would be given them. Therefore God is always the one who determines when and in what context to do His mighty works. That He would continue to do them through believers, even after Christ's ascension, is the meaning of **John 14:12a**.

If the "works" were supernatural signs such as had already been performed, what are the "greater works" of **John 14:12**? The modern claim is that they are greater miracles than Christ ever performed and that they will be done by apostles and prophets at the end of the church age. One problem with this interpretation is that it fails to consider the fact that the promise was given to all believers, not just supposed latter day apostles. Another problem is that not even the Biblical apostles (the ones chosen by Christ) did greater miracles than He performed. Those who witnessed Christ's miracles said that they were greater than ever had been.

For example in **John 9** the healing of the blind man was considered a unique miracle: "Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind" (**John 9:32**). After this, Jesus told the healed man to come to faith in Himself which he did. According to the prophet Isaiah, when God would come, the blind would see: "Say to those with anxious heart, 'Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you.' Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped" (**Isaiah 35:4,5**). The point of John 9 is that God did come in the person of Christ and opened the eyes of the blind, and more importantly brought Messianic salvation. If latter day apostles were to do even greater miracles (if it can even be imagined what they might be) then they could claim to be messiahs (anointed ones). So the idea of "greater works" being "greater miracles" has little Biblical merit. If Messiah is not the greatest,

then He is not Messiah.

In this regard the text of **John 14:12** gives us an important clue to the meaning. It says “greater works than these shall he do: because I go to the Father.” The word “because” is causal in the Greek.<sup>3</sup> This means that the cross and the ascension is the reason that believers would do greater works. The fact of the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ would make the greater works possible. So what exactly happened because of the entire event of the cross that would precipitate greater works than those performed by Christ Himself? I believe that it is the conversion of peoples, Jews first and also Gentiles, through the preaching of the Gospel. However, if this interpretation is correct, there should be evidence in the Gospel of John that supports it. Let us examine the evidence.

The connection between works and coming to faith is strong in John. Consider **John 5:19-21**: “Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, that you may marvel. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes.’” This saying was a response to criticism about Jesus healing on the Sabbath. Jesus claimed the right to work on the Sabbath (the Jews recognized that God did His work of sustaining all things, even on Sabbath) because of Jesus’ unique relationship to God (**John 5:17,18**). Because of this they wanted to kill Him. Notice that the work of healing a lame man (see **Isaiah 35:6**, this too is a predicted Messianic sign), serves as a background for “greater works.” The greater works are spelled out for us: “the Son also gives life to whom He wishes” (**verse 18**).

The “greater works” of John 5 concern the giving of life. The context shows that this does not mean raising the physical dead, like Lazarus, but rather giving spiritual life to the spiritually dead. Here is what Jesus went on to say: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent

Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live” (**John 5:24,25**). This is the meaning of the phrase “greater works” in **John 5:18**.

There is more evidence in John that believing upon Christ for salvation is a greater work. In John 6, as I previously mentioned, Jesus had done mighty miracles. In that context He was asked about the work of God: “They said therefore to Him, ‘What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent’” (**John 6:28,29**). If the miracles (which did not cause these people to come to faith, they would soon leave Him - **John 6:66**) were works of God, the greater work would be to come to faith, which they subsequently refused to do.

Some might object and say that conversions are the work of God, and that therefore they cannot be the “greater works” that believers would do because Jesus went to the Father. In that regard, it is just as true that miracles are the work of God, so the objection weighs just as heavily against their own position. Also, there is further evidence that Jesus was thinking of people coming to faith after His ascension. It is found in Jesus’ high priestly prayer: “I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word” (**John 17:20**). They would testify about Christ and many would believe. Interestingly, in John 6 after Jesus did the miracles, all but the 12 left Him. Compare that to the Day of Pentecost when Peter preached and 3,000 were saved on that day alone. Jesus did greater miracles; but fewer people came to saving faith during His public ministry than did in the first days of the early church when Jesus went to the Father.

Leon Morris comments on conversions as the “greater works”: “What Jesus means we may see in the narratives of the Acts. There there are a few miracles of healing, but the emphasis is on the mighty works of conversion. On the day of Pentecost alone more believers were added to the little band

of believers than throughout Christ’s entire earthly life. There we see a literal fulfillment of ‘greater works than these shall he do.’”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Lenski writes: “Can there be greater? Indeed, far greater: convert sinners by God’s grace, carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, save souls for life eternal . . . These are great because in miracles only omnipotence and goodness are revealed but in saving souls all the grace of God in Christ Jesus. The great works deal with the material, the greater with the spiritual (5:20,21).”<sup>5</sup> William Hendricksen says that the greater works are “the conversion of the Gentiles.”<sup>6</sup>

The context in the Book of John and the larger Biblical context show that “greater works” are works of conversion by God’s grace. I submit that since the purpose of Christ was to die a substitutionary death to bring about God’s gracious purposes of salvation, the fulfillment of that purpose through the ministry of the church after Christ’s ascension is the greatest work that could possibly be done. Since miracles and signs point to Christ as the true Messiah, they stand in a lesser relationship to the actual bringing of sinners to the Christ to whom they point.

#### ASKING IN HIS NAME

Jesus then said to them, “And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (**John 14:13**). Many claim that by invoking the phrase “in the name of Jesus” and having sufficient faith, one can have anything for which one asks. Some modify the idea by saying it means “by my authority” and link this to the previous verse. The idea then becomes that those truly authorized by Jesus to be apostles and prophets will be able to ask and thereby do greater works to show they are indeed apostles and prophets. That is that the doing of “greater works” (in their scheme of things — miracles) would show them to be true apostles and prophets.

Both of these interpretations are problematic. The formula idea is pagan. The pagans believed that if they knew the secret name of their gods, and “jumped through the right hoops” they could get what they wanted from such gods by invoking their names. Secret

utterances were reserved for the elite who earned the privilege of knowing the mysteries of the religion. The sons of Sceva in **Acts 19** held this sort of belief. Observing people being delivered from demons under Paul's preaching, they thought they discovered the secret: "But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, 'I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches'" (**Acts 19:13**). This backfired on them when the demonized man overpowered them (**Acts 19:14-16**). The name of Jesus was not a formula.

Furthermore, this section of Scripture helps us understand the Biblical significance of the "name": "And this became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified" (**Acts 19:17**). How was it that an attempt to use the name of Jesus that ended in failure cause "the name of the Lord Jesus" to be magnified in Ephesus? The answer is that the name here signifies His person and nature, His self-revelation through the Gospel. What was being magnified was God's plan of salvation through Christ and His cross. People were learning about the person of Christ, not some formula for success or doing miracles. Paul preached the cross, and that is where the power of God is manifested (**1 Corinthians 1:18**).

Problems also accompany the idea that miracles done in Jesus' name prove true apostolic authority. For example, consider this passage: "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (**Matthew 7:22,23**). Here are people who invoked His name and did miracles, but rather than being commended as true apostles and prophets, they are refused entrance to the eternal kingdom (**Matthew 7:21**) because they were not doing the Father's will. The ones who are commended as building on the rock are those who hear Christ's words and act upon them. His words are His teachings that are written in the New Testament by His apostles.

The name, as used in **John 14:13**, finds its meaning in the Hebrew concept that the name of God is His self-revelation in holiness and truth. The name signifies His nature and character. Therefore asking in His name is by definition asking according to His purposes. And Christ's purpose is revealed in the passage itself: "that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (**John 14:13b**). The purpose of answered prayer is to advance the Father's Messianic purposes. Leon Morris comments on this passage: "It means that prayer is to be in accordance with all that the name stands for. It is prayer proceeding from faith in Christ, prayer that gives expression to a unity with all that Christ stands for, prayer which seeks to set forward Christ Himself. And the purpose of it all is the glory of God."<sup>7</sup> William Hendricksen comments: "His name is his self-revelation in his works; here particularly, his self-revelation in the sphere of redemption. It is not difficult to see that such a prayer will always and most certainly be answered, for the one who utters it does not ever want anything that Christ does not want!"<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of prayer in His name is to glorify the Father in the Son, and the Father is glorified in the Son through His plan of redemption. This glorification is accomplished, according to John, through the cross. The sending of the Holy Spirit to empower the church to preach the gospel to all nations will bring about this glorification. The prayers of the redeemed are to this end, since God has put His purposes in our hearts and minds.

#### CONCLUSION

Jesus' discourse in John 14 - 15 prepares His disciples for His departure. The teachings in these chapters give comfort and hope by assuring the disciples that Jesus is not leaving them helpless and hopeless. He has a place for them prepared in heaven, He will send the Holy Spirit, and they shall have continual access to the Father in His name. Jesus emphasizes that it is necessary for Him to go to the Father so that His purposes would be accomplished. Far from the horrible tragedy that they would imagine it to be, it will be the best thing that could happen for them and all believ-

ers. God's Messianic purposes would be fulfilled **because** Jesus goes to the Father by way of the cross.

It is a damaging misuse of the text to suggest that Jesus is actually saying that most of church history would be a long colossal failure until a couple of thousand years later when a special group of latter day apostles and prophets come on the scene and do greater miracles than Jesus. Neither does the text give **any** believers of **any** period of history *carte blanc* power to invoke the name of Jesus and get whatever they want. Latter day apostles will not fulfill the promises of **John 14:12,13** by doing more and greater miracles than Jesus did. God will fulfill these promises by using believers throughout the church age and throughout the world to depend on Him and preach the gospel, bringing all of God's elect to faith before Christ returns.

#### END NOTES

1. see Bill Hamon *Apostles, Prophets and the Coming Moves of God* (Destiny Image: Shippensburg, PA, 1997) which is replete with such grandiose claims. Hamon follows the Latter Rain heresy in claiming that Prophets and Apostles who are a "new breed of man" will bring about the manifestation of the sons of God who will take full dominion over the earth before the return of Christ (see page 235).
2. Leon Morris *The Gospel According to John*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1971) 636.
3. R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* in "Commentary on the New Testament" (Augsberg: Minneapolis, 1961) Hendrickson Publishers edition, 1998; On page 989 he writes: "This causal clause shuts out the misconception as though these works of the disciples would make them equal to Jesus, one also in essence with the Father."
4. Morris, 646.
5. Lenski, 989.
6. William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* in "New Testament Commentary" (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1953) 1987 edition, 273.
7. Morris 646.
8. Hendriksen 274.

Published by TWIN CITY FELLOWSHIP  
P.O. Box 8068  
Minneapolis, MN 55416  
612-874-7484  
www.twincityfellowship.com

## ALLUSIONS OF GRANDEUR: The Benefit of Reading the New Testament in Light of the Old

BY RYAN HABBENA

**T**HE NEWER, THE BETTER. So goes much of our modern cultural mindset. Sadly, this type of thinking has crept into how many view the Old Testament Scriptures. Many believe the Old Testament has “passed on” (so to speak) and the New Testament has replaced it. While much of the Old Testament has in a sense passed on (see Hebrews 10:9) and much has been fulfilled (see Matthew 5:17), studying the New Testament Scriptures in light of the Old is a rich discipline that enhances our vision of the whole counsel of God.

### WHAT IS AN ALLUSION?

One of the ways that the Old Testament can cast light on the New is through the *allusion*. An allusion differs from an explicit reference by the very nature of its subtlety. An explicit reference to the Old Testament Scriptures is one that is clearly telling, such as Matthew 8:17: “This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: ‘He Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases.’” An allusion, on the other hand, is much less noticeable and requires diligence to discover.

To demonstrate the nature and subtlety of allusions in the New Testament, an exploration of two passages that well represent the nature of the allusion is in order. First, an examination of the “Great Commission” of Christ in Matthew 28 will prove helpful. Secondly, the controversial warning passage found in Hebrews chapter 10 will be explored.

### THE GREAT COMMISSION: MATTHEW 28:18-20

The Great Commission found in Matthew 28 is one of the most quoted passages of the New Testament.

However, many are unaware of the many Old Testament allusions evident within these three verses. As we shall see, each thought is rooted in promises given in the Old Testament Scriptures.

1) “And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth’” (Matthew 28:18)

Jesus first declaration in the Great Commission is a reference to His sovereign kingship. Daniel prophesies about this coming One, which is what Jesus’ language here is echoing. In Daniel chapter 7 notice what is “given” to the “one like a son of man”:

I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).

Notice that an eternal “dominion” was given to the “One like a Son of Man.” And even beyond that, this “dominion” was to be constituted of all “peoples, nations, and languages.” This serves as a bridge to the next portion of the Great Commission.

2) “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

The book of Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus of Nazareth. Christ’s lineage is traced back to Abraham. Why is this so significant? Matthew is concerned with declaring Jesus as the promised Jewish Messiah. However,

he is also seeking to state clearly the purpose of the Messiah’s first coming – to provide atonement for sins and begin gathering the constituency of His Kingdom. Matthew established Christ as the “descendant of Abraham” at the beginning of his Gospel. Now at the end of Matthew’s account he is proclaiming Christ as the central fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise. God unequivocally proclaimed that through Abraham’s descendant “all the nations” would be blessed (Genesis 22:18, Galatians 3:). In the Great Commission Christ sends out His disciples to “all the nations” with the message of the Gospel as a fulfillment of this promise.<sup>1</sup> This leads us to the powerful and triumphant conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel account.

3) “Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

In the book of Isaiah, it is promised that God would send “a Son” through a virgin whose name would be “Immanuel.” Matthew makes reference to this promise after the angel’s intervening work, moving Joseph to take Mary as his wife: “Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which translated means, ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:22-23).

At the culmination of Matthew’s account, Jesus identifies Himself as the fulfillment of this promise given through Isaiah; alluding to it when he proclaims: “**I am with you**, even to the end of the age.” Matthew clearly demonstrates through the bookends of his narrative that this promise was (and is!) fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

### “SINNING WILLFULLY”: HEBREWS 10:26-29

Recognizing allusions may also prove helpful in casting light on passages that are often considered “difficult.” This turns out to be the case with the warn-

ing found in Hebrews chapter 10:

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:26-29)

While there are several issues evident within this complex passage, I wish to focus on the term “sinning willfully” in verse 26. Many have struggled with what exactly the author of Hebrews is trying to convey with this term. The confusion proceeds from the fact that every “sin” is indeed done “willfully” in the sense that all who “sin” do the act of their own volition, thus “willfully” in one sense of the word. Furthermore, the Apostle John makes it quite clear: “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Thus, if we are to maintain that the Scriptures are consistent in its unified message, “sinning willfully” must have some other meaning than that noted above. The question then is: “What does the author of Hebrews have in mind when he writes the term: “sinning willfully”?”

Light is cast on this difficult passage when we realize that the author of Hebrews is most probably alluding to a distinct yet similar warning found in the Old Testament. In Numbers 15 we find that those “under the law of Moses” were given instruction and warning regarding “sinning unintentionally” and “sinning willfully.” Note the following:

Also if one person sins unintentionally, then he shall offer

a one year old female goat for a sin offering. The priest shall make atonement before the Lord for the person who goes astray when he sins unintentionally, making atonement for him that he may be forgiven. You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the sons of Israel and for the alien who sojourns among them. But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the Lord; and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the Lord and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt will be on him. (Numbers 15:27-31)

Therefore, since the author of Hebrews clearly notes that he is making an analogy to the punishment of those who “set aside the law” (vs. 28-29), we get a somewhat clearer picture of what he means by “sinning willfully.” Since there was a distinction in the Old Testament regarding those who had received the revelation of the Lord through Moses of “sinning unintentionally” and “sinning defiantly,” the author of Hebrews makes the following point analogous to the Old Testament instructions and warning: If those who defiantly spurned the Law after receiving the knowledge of its truth were put to death, how much greater will be the punishment of those who defiantly spurn the Gospel of Jesus Christ after receiving the knowledge of its truth.

After carefully examining the passage and the roots that the author of Hebrews is relating it to, it becomes evident the definition of “sinning willfully” carries with it the meaning of one who *defiantly* blasphemes the Gospel after accepting the concept that it is indeed true.<sup>2</sup> When this is done, only a fearful expectation of the eternal judgment of God remains for that individual.

## THE GRANDEUR OF THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD

Searching for and recognizing allusions opens our eyes to the grandeur of the whole counsel of God. Allusions also prove helpful when examining various difficult passages. The above two passage truly just break the surface of the deep wealth of allusions dwelling throughout God’s word. As we page through the gracious gift given through Christ and His apostles, we must be cognizant of the vintage roots of this very message. The Old Testament is a veritable treasure of God’s work and promises through His people. The New Testament authors recognized this and utilized its continued value. So should all that love God’s inerrant, inspired word.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Greek phrase used here for nations, *panta ta ethne*, is the exact same phrase used in the Abrahamic promises (Genesis 12:3, 22:18) in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the O.T.). The Septuagint often proves to be a great help in discovering allusions.

<sup>2</sup> For further study of the warning passages in the book of Hebrews and the complex issues evident in them, see Wayne Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from the Warning Passages in Hebrews,” *Still Sovereign*, Ed. Thomas R. Shreiner, Bruce A. Ware, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). Bob Dewaay, “Hebrews 6:4-8 on Apostasy,” *Critical Issues Commentary*, Issue 49, Nov/Dec, 1998.

Critical Issues Commentary  
copyright © 2001

Published by TWIN CITY FELLOWSHIP  
P.O. Box 8068  
Minneapolis, MN 55416  
612-874-7484  
www.twincityfellowship.com  
email: pastorbob@twincityfellowship.com

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.