

A more comprehensive comprehension and appropriate application: An answer to dwindling faith commitment from the book of Hebrews



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Closely linked to the phenomenon of the decline in church member numbers in the Western church, is the phenomenon of dwindling their faith commitment. This is the phenomenon in which church members do not show the same vitality and zeal as before and are in danger of abandoning their faith. The current article contributed to the arsenal of studies, aimed at addressing the phenomenon by presenting the solutions deduced from a single biblical book, namely the book of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews is arguably one of the most fitting biblical books to shed light on how the phenomenon can be addressed, as Hebrews was written to a church that experienced a decline in faith commitment. The primary aim of the article was to determine what solutions the writer of Hebrews proposes for addressing his addressees' dwindling in their faith commitment, while the secondary aim was to reflect on how the writer's solutions can be applied in the 21st century church. In order to achieve these aims, reconstruction by means of exegesis and a detailed literature study is used in the article. It begins with the reconstruction of the context of the addressees, specifically to determine the reason(s) why they dwindled in their faith commitment. This was followed by reconstructing the writer's solution for his addressees' dwindling faith commitment. Next, the writer's solution was fleshed out in the light of the whole of Hebrews by tracing the major themes and broad lines found in the book. It is noted that the writer addresses the issue by guiding and exhorting his addressees to come to a more comprehensive comprehension and appropriate application of their confessed faith. This he does by shaming, frightening, reminding, guiding and assuring them. By means of reflection, it is suggested in the conclusion that the same strategy can be applied in the church today to address the phenomenon of dwindling faith commitment.

Contribution: The article indicated the relevancy of the book of Hebrews for the church in the 21st century, especially in terms of addressing the issue of dwindling faith commitment. As such, the article gives practical suggestions on how the issue can be addressed from the book of Hebrews by pastors, ministers, pastoral counsellors, Bible students, and church members.

Keywords: dwindling faith commitment; Hebrews; Hebrews 5:11–6:3; faith commitment; comprehensive comprehension; appropriate application; perseverance; apostasy.

Introduction

The church in the West is gradually but unquestionably declining in member numbers. While a statement like this is by no means novel, as various studies on the phenomenon prove (i.a. eds. Johnson & Ross 2009:8–9; eds. McLeod & Ustorf 2003; Pew Research Center 2011; ed. Peterson 2017; cf. Barna 2020; Pew Research Center 2019; Van Helden 2016), and while Christians may rejoice in the fact that the church is growing in other parts of the world, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America (eds. Johnson & Ross 2009:8; Pew Research Center 2011), the decline of the church in the West remains alarming and distressing for global Christianity.

In addition, it is projected that for the foreseeable future, the church in the West will keep on declining (Pew Research Center 2015:17).¹

The reasons for the decline in church member numbers in the West are legion. A variety of factors play in on one another, including anti-Christian sentiment, which may or may not include some form of persecution; atheism with its attacks on the intellectual validity of the

1. Despite the shift in Christianity's centre of gravity (cf. eds. Johnson & Ross 2009:52–53), scholars project that the percentage of global Christians in proportion to the global population will remain more or less the same by 2050 (Pew Research Center 2015:7–8), or even increase slightly (eds. Johnson & Ross 2009:44–45).

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Christian faith; global secularism, pluralism and relativism; immigration and population changes; changing attitudes to death and technology; and certain aspects of liberal theology, which undermine the authority of Scripture (eds. Johnson & Ross 2009:104; ed. Peterson 2017:33–74; eds. McLeod & Ustorf 2003).

Closely linked to the phenomenon of the decline in church member numbers in the Western church, is the phenomenon of dwindling faith commitment. This is the phenomenon in which church members may still identify themselves as Christians, but their commitment to their confessed faith has dramatically decreased. Not showing the same vitality and zeal as before, they are in danger of becoming nominal Christians (or 'non-practicing Christians' in the words of Barna [2020]), and eventually abandoning their faith (i.e. apostatising; cf. Karlberg 1996:32–33). While a decline in church member numbers does not necessarily indicate a decline in faith commitment of the specific church or those leaving it (cf. Jamieson 2002; Packard & Hope 2015; Packard & Ferguson 2019:499–517), a decline in faith commitment usually results in a decline in church member numbers.

In general, the reasons for dwindling faith commitment overlap with many of the reasons stated above for the decline in church member numbers, often triggered by a religious disappointment (cf. Strelan, Acton & Patrick 2015:210), or an increasing conviction that God and religion in the modern world is irrelevant (cf. Cureteu 1987:64–66).

Various attempts have been made to address the phenomenon of dwindling faith commitment from a variety of traditions,² differing in degrees of soundness, practicality and success. The current article would like to contribute to the arsenal of studies aimed at addressing the phenomenon of dwindling faith commitment by presenting the solutions deduced from a single biblical book, namely the book of Hebrews.

The book of Hebrews is arguably one of the most fitting biblical books to shed light on how the phenomenon can be addressed, as Hebrews was written to a church that experienced a decline in faith commitment. Throughout the book the writer addresses this issue in a variety of ways, exhorting his addressees to endure and to be faithful. Consequently, Hebrews gives a glimpse of how a biblical author addresses the phenomenon of dwindling faith commitment.

The primary aim of this article is to determine what solutions the writer of Hebrews proposes for addressing his addressees' dwindling faith commitment. The secondary aim is to reflect on how the writer's solutions can be applied in the 21st century church.

In order to achieve these aims, the article makes use of reconstruction by means of exegesis and a detailed literature

2. For a popular work on addressing the phenomenon from a Reformed perspective, see Beeke (2011).

study. Taking into account the difficulties and dangers inherently linked to reconstruction (i.e., arguments from silence), it is attempted to be scrupulously fair to the text of Hebrews by weighing different arguments, working with the most probable or generally accepted findings, and stating the article's findings as possibilities, not forgone conclusions (cf. Lane 1991a:liii).

Firstly, the context of the addressees is reconstructed, specifically to determine the reason(s) why they dwindled in their faith commitment. This is followed by reconstructing the writer's solution for his addressees' dwindling faith commitment. Next, the writer's solution is fleshed out in the light of the whole of Hebrews by tracing the major themes and broad lines found in the book. The conclusion is a reflection on how the writer's solutions can be applied in the church today to address the phenomenon of dwindling faith commitment.

This article is gratefully dedicated to my emeritus colleague and mentor, Gert Breed, whose passion for practical theology is both tangible and contagious.

A reconstruction of the reason(s) why the addressees dwindled in their faith commitment

In order to deduce the reason(s) why the addressees of Hebrews dwindled in their faith commitment, the identity and history of the congregation should be investigated.

The identity of the congregation

As virtually all commentaries, monographs and articles on Hebrews indicate, the identity of the people addressed in Hebrews is a mystery.

From Hebrews itself it seems that the writer is addressing a smaller group of people within a (bigger) church. This is implied in Hebrews 13:17 and 13:24,³ where the addressees are distinguished from their 'leaders' (ἡγούμενοι) and 'all the saints' (πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους). The latter, a common New Testament description for believers (cf. Rm 1:7; Eph 1:1; etc.), most probably refers to the wider community (Ellingworth 1993:26), namely the rest of the members of the bigger church not directly addressed in the sermon.⁴ Hebrews 13:24 also contains greetings from 'those from Italy' (ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας). While the phrase is ambiguous (cf. Cockerill 2012:722; DeSilva 2000:21), the most convincing hypothesis is that it refers to greetings of members from the

3. With the majority of scholars, this article views Hebrews 13:22–25 as part of the original composition of the writer.

4. Together with various scholars, I view Hebrews as a sermon with a letter ending (Cockerill 2012:15; Coetsee 2014:32–38; cf. Koester 2001:80). The distinction between the addressees and the congregation as a whole can also be implied in Hebrews 6:10 and 10:25. The former refers to the addressees 'serving the saints' (διακονήσαντες τοῖς ἁγίοις), which could refer to their service to other believers in the community. The latter exhorts the addressees not to neglect to meet together (μὴ ἐγκαταλείποντες τὴν ἐπισυναγωγὴν ἑαυτῶν), which among others could refer to meeting with the wider community (Ellingworth 1993:26).

same congregation who are not present in the locality of the congregation at the moment (cf. Ellingworth 1993:29).⁵

In the light of this, not only does Rome seem to be one of the most likely localities of the people addressed,⁶ but most scholars agree that the writer is addressing a smaller group of believers, most probably a house church (Bruce 1990:9; Cockerill 2012:16; Koester 2001:74; Lane 1991a:liii; Moffatt 1924:xv; cf. Allen 2010:67; Attridge 1989:9–10; Kleinig 2017:5; Weiss 1991:75; contra DeSilva 2000:22).

While no definite number can be assigned to the number of people addressed or the congregation as a whole, Lane (1991a:liii) is one of the few scholars who ventures to discuss the size of the group addressed by arguing that the house church consisted of 15 to 20 members, basing his argument on the probable size of ordinary rooms in the early Christians' private houses.⁷

Being drenched in Old Testament quotations, allusions and echoes, it is natural to think of the addressees as a house church with a Jewish background. This, however, is not necessarily the case, as various scholars have pointed out (cf. Cockerill 2012:19–23; DeSilva 2000:2–7; Ellingworth 1993:22–27), arguing that the addressees could have been gentile in background. In my view, Kleinig (2017:7) and others are closer to the mark by arguing that 'Hebrews is addressed to a Greek-speaking Jewish-Christian congregation'.

Nonetheless, any reconstruction from Hebrews should account for the book's undeniable Old Testament orientation and background.

It is difficult, however, to determine more precise detail about the identity of the addressees.

The history of the congregation

Three stages can be differentiated in the addressees' history from Hebrews as a whole: the origin, past and present of the congregation.

The congregation's origin

It is clear that the addressees are Christians, confessing Jesus as the Son of God (Heb 1:2) and Lord (Heb 2:3).

When exactly the original members of the congregation came to faith, is not clear. Hebrews only suggests that it was in the past, and that their conversion had a tremendous impact on their worldview and conduct (cf. Heb 10:34). What is clear is the fact that the addressees seem to have come to faith through the preaching of others who had heard the preaching

5.The other possibility is that the writer is referring to his own locality: he is in Italy (Rome) when writing, and those with him (Italians) send their greetings.

6.Among the vast array of localities that have been proposed, Rome, Alexandria and Jerusalem enjoy the most scholarly support as probable destination of Hebrews.

7.Koester (2001:74), although not specifying the possible size of the group of people addressed in Hebrews, argues that 'household gatherings would ordinarily not have included more than thirty to forty people'.

of Jesus, and not the preaching of Jesus himself (Heb 2:3–4). This leads some scholars to view the addressees as so-called 'second generation' Christians (Attridge 1989:12; Lane 1991a:lxii; Mitchell 2007:11; cf. Koester 2001:64), although this is challenged by some (cf. Ellingworth 1993:26). Nonetheless, by the time of the writing of Hebrews, the addressees seem to have been Christians for some time (cf. Heb 5:12; 6:1; 10:23; 13:7).

The congregation's past

The biggest clue concerning the addressees' past comes from Hebrews 10:32–34 (DeSilva 2000:357; Lane 1991a:lxiv), where the writer guides his addressees in reflection of the past in order to encourage them to persevere in the present and the future. Hebrews 10:32–34 indicates that shortly after the addressees' conversion ($\phi\omega\tau\iota\zeta\omega$, 'enlightenment' [cf. Heb 6:4]), they experienced extremely difficult times. They were both verbally and physically persecuted in public, almost certainly because of their new faith commitment.

Despite these hardships, their newfound religious convictions and the solidarity within the group enabled them to risk even more persecution by showing compassion to those who were imprisoned (cf. Kleinig 2017:532).

They even accepted the plundering of their possessions, which can refer to official judicial confiscation or mob looting and violence (Attridge 1989:299; DeSilva 2000:12; Lane 1991b:300), or both (Koester 2001:459), being convinced of the 'all-surpassing value of' their 'heavenly possession' (Cockerill 2012:502–503).

Though the details of this persecution are not clear (cf. Attridge 1989:299), and though it is difficult to convincingly link this to specific historical events in the early church (cf. Moffatt 1924:155),⁸ the writer does seem to refer to specific events surrounding the addressees, and not Christian persecution in general (Lane 1991b:301). While it seems as if at the time of writing no one in the congregation has died for his or her faith yet (Heb 12:4),⁹ the hardship of public ridicule, imprisonment and property loss had a great impact on their faith convictions, as will be seen in the next section.

The congregation's present

The addressees' heroic perseverance in faith, however, was part of their past. At the time of writing, the addressees were dwindling in their faith commitment. The writer was seriously worried that some of them ran the risk of apostasy.

8.As could be expected, the reference to the addressees' persecution is one of the clues to the possible dating of Hebrews and the location of the addressees, which is not discussed here. For a (very) specific reconstruction based on these references, see Lane (1991a:lxiv–lxvi, 1991b:296–301).

9.Hebrews 12:4 states that the addressees, in their struggle 'against sin ($\pi\rho\sigma\tau\eta\nu\ \acute{\alpha}\mu\alpha\rho\tau\iota\alpha\nu$) have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood' (NRSV). On face value, the reference is to the addressees' spiritual struggle against sin which includes and becomes a very real physical struggle. From the broader context various scholars interpret 'sin' as 'sinners' (cf. Croy 1998:194; Lane 1991b:418–419), taking the verse as a reference to the persecution the addressees experienced at the hand of the hostile unbelieving community (cf. Allen 2010:578; Coetsee 2020:2). If this is correct, Hebrews 12:4 suggests that no one in the congregation has been asked to pay the ultimate price for his or her faith yet.

With increasing urgency,¹⁰ he warns the addressees against slowly drifting away from what they have heard like a ship without anchor (Heb 2:1–4), hardening their hearts against God's voice like Israel in the wilderness (Heb 3:7–4:13), falling away after having understood and experienced various Christian gifts (Heb 5:11–6:12), wilfully sinning, spurning the Son and outraging the Spirit (Heb 10:26–31), and openly refusing God who is speaking to them (Heb 12:25–29). The looming threat of apostasy seems to be the writer's primary concern for writing Hebrews (cf. Lane 1991a:lv).

While the exact reason for the looming apostasy is not clear, the most convincing explanation is that it is due to a combination of ongoing 'but less intense friction' with the non-Christian community (Koester 2001:71; cf. Heb 13:3), and 'a waning commitment to the community's confessed faith' (Attridge 1989:13; cf. Cockerill 2012:16–18). The latter, of course, was almost certainly influenced by the former. Being out of favour in the broader community for a longer period of time (DeSilva 2000:18; cf. Cockerill 2012:17–18; Kleinig 2017:7), and unable to see tangible advantages of their professed faith, the faith commitment of some members of the congregation dwindled. While this spiritual lassitude could have been worsened by knowledge of coming persecution (as some interpret Heb 12:4; 13:13–14), or disappointment in the delay of the Parousia (cf. Lane 1991a:lxii), it is not clear. What is clear is that the congregation's dwindling faith commitment seems to be due to both external and internal circumstances, with the one influencing and feeding off the other, and that the writer of Hebrews aims to address the issue in his sermon.¹¹

Findings

It seems best to conclude that Hebrews was written to a small, unidentified second-generation Jewish-Christian house church whose members were willing to suffer persecution shortly after their conversion but now ran the risk of apostasy due to a dwindling in their faith commitment, which was most probably in part the result of being out of favour in the broader community for a longer period of time.

A reconstruction of the writer's solution for his addressees' dwindling faith commitment

While Hebrews 10:32–34 is the most important passage for reconstructing the addressees' past hardships shortly after their conversion, Hebrews 5:11–6:3 is, arguably, the most important for reconstructing their current situation and the writer's solution for their dwindling faith commitment (cf. Lane 1991a:134). Consequently, the bulk of this section is

10. The writer starts by warning the addressees against gradually drifting away from the faith, and ends by warning them against openly and deliberately rejecting God who is speaking to them (cf. Coetsee 2014:275–276).

11. This is not to say that this is the only purpose of Hebrews. Other reconstructions, of course, have been given. Historically, the most common view is that the writer of Hebrews is 'attempting to dissuade his Jewish Christian readers from a relapse into Judaism brought on by increasing persecution and a desire for the stability of the old faith' (Allen 2010:79).

devoted to a detailed discussion of Hebrews 5:11–6:3, followed by a discussion of the writer's solution for his addressees' dwindling faith commitment from Hebrews as a whole.

Hebrews 5:11–6:3

Various scholars view Hebrews 5:11–6:12 as the third warning passage in Hebrews, aiming to exhort the addressees to renewed zeal and perseverance in faith. The passage consists of a reproof (Heb 5:11–6:3), a warning (Heb 6:4–8) and an encouragement (Heb 6:9–12) (cf. Koester 2001:307).¹² In what follows, special attention is given to the writer's reproof in Hebrews 5:11–6:3.

The writer's charge (Heb 5:11)

The writer starts by making it clear that he has much to say about the topic he has just introduced (Heb 5:11), namely concerning the Son as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5:10). He feels compelled, however, to interrupt this discussion because of the disposition of the addressees. According to him, the addressees have become 'dull' or 'lazy' (νωθρός; cf. Bauer et al. 2000:683; L&N 88.249) in 'hearing' (ἀκοή). This is why he calls his discussion of the Son's high priesthood 'hard to explain' or 'hard to interpret' (δυσερμήνευτος; cf. Bauer et al. 2000:265; L&N 33.149). It is hard, not because the topic or content is excessively difficult, but because of the unwillingness of the addressees to listen, which is a result of their spiritual regression (cf. Cockerill 2012:255; Kleinig 2017:273; Koester 2001:300; Thompson 2008:129). This interpretation is strengthened by using the perfect 'have become' (γεγόνατε), indicating that the addressees were previously receptive to listening and understanding (cf. Cockerill 2012:257; Ellingworth 1993:301).

Now, however, due to their dwindling faith commitment, they 'are in a state where they fail to attend, grasp, and heed God's message as they should' (Cockerill 2012:257; cf. Allen 2010:335).

The writer's solution (Heb 5:12–14)

In order to rectify this, the writer seems to make use of the first century culture of honour and shame. The writer attempts to shame his addressees for their spiritual regression in order to jolt them to renewed zeal and a renewed faith commitment (cf. Cockerill 2012:256–258; DeSilva 2000:210; Koester 2001:308).¹³ This the writer does by describing their regression with the use of four interwoven and (mostly) contrasting metaphors: teachers vs. learners (διδάσκαλος, διδάσκω; 5:12), milk vs. solid food (γάλα, στερεά τροφή; 5:12–14), infants vs. adults (νήπιος [sg.], τέλειος; 5:13–14) and exercise (γυμνάζω; 5:14). All four are common Hellenistic metaphors used for education purposes (cf. Attridge 1989:156–158; Cockerill 2012:257; Thompson 2008:120).

12. The passage that follows, namely Hebrews 6:13–20, which completes Hebrews 5:11–6:20, can be viewed as an assurance (Cockerill 2012:252).

13. Closely related to this, Allen (2010:334), Attridge (1989:157), and Lane (1991a:135) refer to the use of irony in the passage. Lane (1991a:135) also identifies sarcasm in Hebrews 5:12.

The flow of Hebrews 5:12–14 can be viewed as follows:

- Hebrews 5:12a: The writer states that while the addressees should have been able to teach others by this time,¹⁴ they themselves need to be taught the 'basic elements' (τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς; cf. L&N 58.19) or 'ABC's' (Moffatt 1924:70; cf. Bruce 1990:135; Hughes 1977:190) of God's revelation (lit. 'oracles of God'; λόγιον τοῦ θεοῦ), referring to 'the basics of the Christian faith' (Mitchell 2007:117; cf. Koester 2001:301). Not only was a greater level of spiritual growth expected of them by this time; the writer feels that they need remediation.
- Hebrews 5:12b-14: The writer continues by stating that because of their regression, the addressees are unable to digest 'solid food' (στερεὰ τροφή), which refers to his discussion of 'Christ's Melchizedekian high priesthood' (Ellingworth 1993:304; cf. Cockerill 2012:259; Lane 1991a:139), and consequently need 'milk' (γάλα), namely 'elementary' or 'easily digestible doctrine' (Attridge 1989:156, 159). He accuses them of being 'infants' (νήπιος [sg.]), unskilled in 'the word of righteousness' (λόγος δικαιοσύνης),¹⁵ ignorant of 'the right course of life' in their difficult circumstances in the light of 'the revelation of Christ's high priesthood' (Cockerill 2012:258–259; cf. Koester 2001:309). This is distressing to the writer, since it bespeaks the spiritual immaturity of the addressees who should have been 'mature' (τέλειος) by this time, able to distinguish good from evil due to constant practice.¹⁶

With these images, it seems that the writer attempts to shame his addressees to come to the point where they hear, understand and accept more advanced doctrines (Attridge 1989:158–159). Moffatt (1924:70) strikingly captures the writer's gist by stating that the writer blames the addressees of being 'responsible for this second childhood of theirs'. By continuing his discussion of Christ's high priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek in Hebrews 7 (cf. Heb 7:1–10:18), which contains quite advanced theology, the interpretation that the writer uses Hebrews 5:11–14 to shame the addressees, is confirmed (cf. Koester 2001:308). This interpretation is also supported by the fact that the writer does not expound the basic teachings listed in Hebrews 6:1–2 (DeSilva 2000:211), the writer's wish that the addressees should not 'become' (γένησθε; aorist subjunctive) 'sluggish' in Hebrews 6:12 (contra Heb 5:11), and the overwhelmingly positive reflection on God's promises in Hebrews 6:13–20. Consequently, clearly Hebrews 5:11–6:20 is a digression that aims 'to prepare the audience to give their full attention to what would follow' (Koester 2001:307; cf. Thompson 2008:199).

14.As various scholars indicate, the writer is not referring to a specific office of 'teacher', but suggests that the addressees have been Christians long enough to be able to teach others the basics of their faith.

15.Although several divergent explanations for this phrase has been suggested (cf. Attridge 1989:160; Ellingworth 1993:306–307; Lane 1991a:137–138), the context (especially Heb 5:14) supports the interpretation of the phrase in an ethical sense: the addressees are charged with being unskilled in knowing what is morally right and wrong (Allen 2010:337; Attridge 1989:160–161; Bruce 1990:136; DeSilva 2000:212; Koester 2001:302; cf. Hughes 1977:191).

16.For an excellent summary of the images used in Hebrews 5:11–14 and its primary and secondary referents, see Attridge (1989:162). Cf. Kleinig (2017:271).

The writer's conviction (Heb 5:11–6:3)

The writer's solution spelled out above, reveals something of his conviction concerning the maturity of believers, more specifically the maturity his addressees should strive for. 'Maturity' or 'perfection' (τελ-) is one of the key words and primary themes of Hebrews 5:11–6:12. The writer implies that his addressees should grow from being 'infants' (νήπιος [sg.]; Heb 5:13) to being 'mature' (τέλειος; Heb 5:14), leaving behind basic teachings and going on to 'perfection' (τελειότης; Heb 6:1).¹⁷

It seems as if the writer views the addressees' comprehension of and commitment to their confessed faith as something that can be measured, at least in broad terms. While Hebrews 5:11–6:3 probably does not reflect stages of 'ascent' or development characteristic to first century Greek philosophy (Owen 1957; cf. Cockerill 2012:258; Ellingworth 1993:301–302), it does indicate a level of comprehension of and commitment to faith the writer expects his addressees to have reached. The addressees were not to act like infants; they were to become mature or perfect in their comprehension of and commitment to faith and conduct themselves accordingly.

Stating that the addressees should 'become' mature or perfect, however, can be misleading. The exact use and meaning of the 'perfection' (τελ-) language in Hebrews is a matter of scholarly debate (cf. DeSilva 2000:194–195; McCrudden 2008; Peterson 1982). On the one hand, Hebrews refers to the perfection achieved for the addressees by their ultimate High Priest (Heb 10:14). Because of the perfect sacrifice of Christ, the addressees are considered perfect. On the other hand, the addressees are called to strive towards perfection (Heb 6:1) and holiness (Heb 12:14), suggesting that they still need to grow in these virtues.

In my view, in Hebrews there seems to be an interrelationship between the perfection achieved for the addressees by Christ and the perfection they should be striving towards. On the one hand, the perfection achieved for the addressees by Christ is exactly that: it is 'perfect'; it is enough. The addressees, however, are called to respond to this divine grace by striving towards perfection. Because they have been perfected by Christ, the addressees should faithfully and obediently respond by growing in holiness. From the seriousness and urgency of the writer's admonitions and exhortations, it seems like he considered it unthinkable that the addressees would not respond to God's gracious revelation and salvation in Christ but with perseverance and maturity. This, the addressees were to strive for with the added knowledge that perfection would only be reached at the consummation (Heb 12:23; cf. DeSilva 2000:202–203; Ellingworth 1993:680–681)

Consequently, from the perfection language in Hebrews 5:11–6:12, it seems as if the writer was convinced that his addressees can and should reach a higher level of comprehension and commitment. This they needed to do in order to avoid the threatening danger of apostasy.

17.See also the use of 'end' (τέλος) in Hebrews 6:8 and 6:11.

Hebrews in general

Turning to the rest of Hebrews, the conclusions reached above about the writer's solution for his addressees' dwindling in their commitment to faith are strengthened and expanded. This is clear from the following themes:

The catastrophic consequences of apostasy

Throughout Hebrews, the writer attempts to rectify his addressees' lethargy and apathy towards the word of God by sketching in terrifying detail the catastrophic consequences of the course they have taken, which will end in apostasy if they do not act soon. The writer warns that they cannot escape if they neglect the great salvation achieved by God through Christ (Heb 2:3), that those who apostatise, would not enter into God's rest (Heb 4:1, 11) and cannot be restored again to repentance (Heb 6:4–6), and that wilful sin and refusal of God's speech only has the fearful prospect of judgement (Heb 10:27) with no escape (Heb 12:25). By depicting the judgement of God in such vivid and terrifying language, the writer aims to frighten the addressees up to the point where they rekindle their diminishing faith commitment.¹⁸

The onus of perseverance

Despite the partial external cause of the addressees' dwindling faith commitment, in addressing the issue, the writer solely stresses the responsibility of the addressees. Nowhere does the writer touch on the non-Christian community's culpability and the consequent innocence of the addressees when it comes to their dwindling in their commitment (cf. Ellingworth 1993:80). Among others, the addressees should pay greater attention to what they have heard (Heb 2:1); they should not harden their hearts (Heb 3:8, 15; 4:7); they should run with perseverance the race set before them (Heb 12:2); and they should not refuse God who is speaking to them (Heb 12:25). The writer warns them that they have no excuse should they fall away.

The writer also emphasises the addressees' responsibility of looking after the faith commitment of one another. They should exhort one another not to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:13); they should take care that no one fails to reach and enter God's rest, due to disobedience (Heb 4:1, 11); they should provoke one another to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24); they should encourage one another to meet together (Heb 10:25); they were to see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and that no one becomes like Esau, who is described as an immoral and godless person (Heb 12:14–16).

Both themes are made especially clear in the latter chapters of Hebrews, where the writer motivates and exhorts the addressees to persevere in faith (Heb 10:32–12:13) and to look after one another (Heb 12:14–17).

18. For different views on the meaning of the five warning passages in Hebrews, see Bateman (ed. 2007), and for suggestions on how to preach these passages, see Hollifield (2015:3–20).

The need for a comprehensive comprehension of the person and work of Christ

While severe warnings of the coming judgement are part of the writer's arsenal of ways to revive his addressees' dwindling faith commitment, he is not primarily a 'doom and gloom' preacher. His dire warnings are countered by lengthy expositions on the superiority and finality of God's gracious revelation and salvation in his Son (cf. Coetsee 2020:3; Ellingworth 1993:80; Guthrie 1994:127 ff.). Throughout Hebrews the writer expounds on who Christ is, what he has done, what he is doing and what he will do. The writer elaborates especially on the high priestly ministry of Christ (cf. Heb 4:14–5:10; 7:1–10:18). With these expositions the writer guides his addressees to reach a more comprehensive comprehension of the person and work of Christ, being seemingly convinced that a deeper understanding and renewed awe will lead to perseverance in faith and a rekindled faith commitment. It also seems as if the writer was convinced that such a deeper understanding of the person and work of Christ would empower the addressees to endure even more persecution (Heb 13:13).

Certainty through faith

Despite the various warnings in Hebrews, the writer leaves no doubt that the faithful addressees can be certain of God's promises in Christ (Heb 6:13–20). They can be certain of their salvation (Heb 1:3; 10:12, 14; etc.), the opportunity of approaching God with confidence (Heb 10:19–22), and the realisation of their 'eschatological hopes' (Heb 12:22–24; Lane 1991a:465). This the addressees can be certain of through faith. Faith enables them to be certain of the things hoped for, and enables them to see a reality not perceivable through the senses (Heb 11:1; cf. Attridge 1989:308; Cockerill 2012:520).¹⁹

By emphasising the certainty the addressees can have through faith, the writer attempts to rekindle his addressees' dwindling commitment to faith in a positive manner.

Findings

The reconstruction above reveals that the writer aims to rekindle the flame of his addressees' dwindling commitment to faith by making use of a variety of techniques:

- He *shames* them for their dwindling faith commitment.
- He *frightens* them with the ultimate catastrophic consequences of a continued dwindling faith commitment.
- He *reminds* them of their responsibility to persevere in their faith commitment, and to look after one another's faith.
- He *guides* them to a deeper faith commitment by emphasising and expounding on Christ's person and work.
- He *assures* them of the present and eschatological certainty of the faithful.

19. Kleinig (2017:7) fittingly argues that the writer 'sets out to counter the moral and spiritual lethargy that comes from their being publicly rejected and shamed' by encouraging them 'with the divine promises of higher glory, better possessions, and a heavenly inheritance by which they will share in the glory of Christ in the eternal city of God'.

The common denominator of all the above, is religious knowledge, accompanied by appropriate application. Negatively, the writer shames his addressees about what they should already know, and he frightens them with knowledge of eternal judgement. Positively, he provides the addressees with a more comprehensive comprehension of the person and work of Christ, and knowledge of eternal salvation. With both the negative and positive sides of his argument, the writer makes it clear that it is the addressees' responsibility to respond in the appropriate fashion to this knowledge.

Consequently, an argument can be made that the writer's solution for his addressees' dwindling faith commitment is to bring them to a more comprehensive comprehension of their confessed faith, and an appropriate accompanying application.

Fleshing out the writer's solution in the light of the whole of Hebrews

Taking the reconstruction above as starting point, the finer details of what the addressees should have a fuller comprehension of how their appropriate accompanying application should look, is fleshed out in this section by tracing the major themes and broad lines found in Hebrews. To distinguish between what the addressees should comprehend and consequently do, however, is no watertight exercise. For the sake of clarity, the two are discussed separately in what follows.

A more comprehensive comprehension

What the addressees should comprehend more fully in the light of their dwindling commitment to faith,²⁰ is the following:

God is the Creator and ultimate Judge

It almost goes without saying, but the addressees had to know and confess that God exists and should be sought (Heb 11:6; cf. Ellingworth 1993:577). He is the living God (Heb 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; 12:22; cf. Coetsee 2019:5–6), and he should be worshipped with reverence and awe (Heb 12:28).

Two aspects of God's person and work are emphasised especially in Hebrews:

- God as Creator: Dispersed throughout Hebrews several references are found which indicate that God created by his word (Heb 11:3) in 6 days (Heb 4:4), and that his creational works have finished (Heb 4:3). All things exist through him (Heb 2:10). Per implication, the addressees should worship and remain faithful to him.
- God as the ultimate Judge: Hebrews states that no creature is hidden before God, and that all must render an account to him (Heb 4:13). He is the Judge of all (Heb 12:23). This should instil reverent fear in the addressees, realising that God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29), and that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:30–31).

20. For more extensive overviews of the theological themes found and discussed in Hebrews, see Ellingworth (1993:63–77) and Koester (2001:96–129).

God is speaking to them

It is clear from Hebrews that the writer and his addressees considered the Old Testament as the divinely inspired and authoritative word of God. This is especially clear from the writer's use of introductory formulae to his Old Testament quotations (Coetsee & Jordaan 2015:9), and his frequent references to the theme of God's speech throughout his sermon (i.a. Heb 1:1–2a; 4:12; 6:5; 12:25; cf. Coetsee 2014; Griffiths 2014).

The writer starts his discourse by reminding his addressees that the same God who spoke in the past, has recently spoken in his Son (Heb 1:1–2a). The latter not only implies that God's revelation progressed from his Old Testament revelation to his revelation in his Son, but that God's revelation in his Son is superior, climactic, final, personal and urgent (Coetsee 2016:7; cf. 2020:3).

Taking the addressees' dwindling faith commitment as starting point, in these references the addressees are once more reminded that God has revealed himself in Scripture, and is speaking to them from Scripture at this very moment (Coetsee & Jordaan 2015:9) They consequently had to listen obediently to what God says, among others as expounded by the writer of Hebrews. They had to take the utmost care not to 'refuse' (*παραιτέομαι*) God who is speaking (Heb 12:25). Rather, they should 'hear' (*ἀκούω*), that is reverently obey, God's voice 'today' (*σήμερον*; Heb 3:7, 13, 15; 4:7).

Christ is their ultimate High Priest

Without a doubt, the majority of themes in Hebrews can be linked to Christology (cf. Koester 2001:104–110; Lane 1991a:cxxxv–cxliv).²¹ What the addressees should realise anew, and comprehend even more fully, especially in the light of their dwindling faith commitment, is who the Son is, what he has done, is doing and will do. This is the topic par excellence that the addressees should comprehend more comprehensively.

While Hebrews is rich in descriptions of Christ's person and work, as is evidenced among others in the sevenfold description of the Son in the opening words of the sermon (Heb 1:2b–4; cf. Coetsee 2016:6), one aspect of his person and work is emphasised in particular: his high priestly ministry (cf. Houwelingen 2013:103–107).

Throughout Hebrews, but especially in Hebrews 7:1–10:18, the writer expounds on the fact that Christ is their ultimate high priest. He does this by indicating the differences between Christ's priestly ministry and that of the Levitical priests, especially in terms of appointment, sanctuary, sacrifice and covenant (cf. Cockerill 2001:179–201). Hebrews argues that Christ was appointed by God as high priest (Heb 5:5) according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5:10) to make atonement for the sins of people (Heb 2:17). In order to do this, Christ, who is superior to the angels (Heb 1:5–14), was briefly made a little lower than the angels (Heb 2:9); he became flesh (Heb 2:9, 14). Being without sin (Heb 4:15), he was able to present himself as

21. For studies on the Christology of Hebrews, see Bauckham (2009:15–36), Laansma and Treier (eds. 2012) and McCormack (2009:37–68).

a sacrifice for mankind's sin. He endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and endured hostility against himself from sinners (Heb 12:2–3). His sacrifice was perfect; it was once and for all (Heb 7:27; 9:26); no other sacrifices are necessary (Heb 10:12). With his ultimate sacrifice he destroyed the devil (Heb 2:14) and became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb 5:9; 9:12). He perfected for all time those who are sanctified by his single offering (Heb 10:14). At this moment he is seated on the right hand of God in heaven (Heb 8:1; cf. 4:14), where he intercedes for the addressees (Heb 7:25; cf. Moffitt 2020:542–552).

All this the addressees were to realise anew and comprehend even more fully, the result of which will not only be reverent awe for the grace of God in Christ, but also wholehearted worship and obedience. Moreover, by realising this anew, the addressees would have renewed comfort and hope, knowing that Christ became like them in every respect (Heb 2:17), was tested in every respect as they are tested, and can sympathise with their weaknesses (Heb 4:15).

They have an eschatological hope – and warning

The writer of Hebrews not only reminds his addressees about the present reality, but also about their future hope (cf. Cockerill 2012:25–28; Mackie 2007; Schenk 2007; Stewart 2010:545–560; Steyn 2011:429–450).

Hebrews frequently refers to a glorious heavenly city the faithful addressees have access to and will inherit. It is described as a city that is to come (Heb 13:14); a city whose architect and builder is God (Heb 11:10); a city that is prepared for the addressees by God (Heb 11:16). In words leading up to the climax of the sermon, it is referred to as the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, accompanied by various descriptions of joy and certainty (Heb 12:22–24). By being reminded of this once more, the addressees are expected to respond with joyful perseverance and renewed faith commitment.

In the same breath, Hebrews also mentions eschatology to warn the addressees, but with the same aim: to rekindle their faith commitment. Hebrews insists that Christ will come again (Heb 9:28), and that day is approaching (Heb 10:25). In fact, Hebrews states that he will come 'in a very little while' (μικρὸν ὄσον ὄσον; Heb 10:37; cf. Is 26:20). This the addressees had to take to heart and respond by living by faith (Heb 10:38).

Moreover, the addressees are warned that at Christ's return and the consummation of all things, God's voice will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven (Heb 12:26; cf. Hg 2:6; Coetsee 2018:10–11). Therefore, they should respond with reverence and perseverance. They should, in the words of Hebrews 4, strive to enter God's (sabbath) rest while the promise of entering it is still open (Heb 4:1, 9, 11).

An appropriate application

Taking the above as starting point, the appropriate response from the addressees boils down to the following:

Approach God with confidence

In the light of God's revelation and the high priestly ministry of Christ (Guthrie 1994:141), the addressees are called to approach God with confidence. This is stated in overwhelmingly positive terms in two structurally pivotal passages (cf. Nauck 1960) in Hebrews:

- The addressees, realising anew that the possibility of entering God's rest is available, as well as what kind of high priest they have, are exhorted to approach God's throne of grace with 'boldness' or 'confidence' (παρρησία) (Heb 4:14–16).
- Directly following the lengthy exposition of Christ's high priestly ministry (Heb 7:1–10:18), the addressees are guided to come to the conclusion that they can and should approach God with 'boldness' or 'confidence' (παρρησία) because of what Christ has done (Heb 10:19–22).

Approaching God with confidence implies that the addressees should take advantage of the fundamental privilege of access to God that is made available through Christ (Attridge 1989:141; Cockerill 2012:466; Ellingworth 1993:522), and continually do so. By approaching God, the addressees declare that they embrace Christ and what he has done by faith.

The writer's call for the addressees to approach God with confidence, is strengthened by his insistence that they can be certain of God's promises (Heb 6:13–20), and that they have not come to fearful Mount Sinai (Heb 12:18–21), but joyful Mount Zion (Heb 12:22–24; cf. Coetsee 2018:10).

Persevere in faith

Written for a congregation dwindling in their faith commitment, it is not strange that the bulk of the writer's exhortations have to do with perseverance in faith:²²

- On the one hand, the addressees are warned in the so-called five warning passages in Hebrews against abandoning their faith (Heb 2:1–4; 3:7–4:11; 5:11–6:12; 10:26–31; 12:18–29). In most of these cases, these warnings are strengthened by comparing the punishment for similar apostasy in the Old Testament with the punishment that can be expected for neglecting God's superior revelation in his Son.
- On the other hand, the addressees are positively and explicitly exhorted to endure, especially in the final chapters of Hebrews. They need perseverance (Heb 10:36), and are exhorted to hold fast to their confession (Heb 4:14; 10:23) and to run the race set before them with endurance (Heb 12:1), looking to Jesus as example of someone who endured great hostility (Heb 12:3). They should endure trials for the sake of discipline (Heb 12:7) in order to share in God's holiness (Heb 12:10; Coetsee 2020:2). This they had to do despite the possibility of persecution (Heb 13:3, 13; cf. 11:25–27, 35–38). Such endurance included offering as sacrifices to God, acceptable worship (Heb 12:28), praise (Heb 13:15) and good deeds (Heb 13:16).

²²The primacy of perseverance in Hebrews is fittingly captured in the title of DeSilva's (2000) social-rhetorical commentary on Hebrews: *Perseverance in gratitude*.

The onus of perseverance, as previously stated, falls on the shoulders of the addressees. They should respond to God's revelation and Christ's high priestly ministry in the correct manner. This is emphasised in several conditional and explanatory clauses, of which the following serve as example:

- They are considered God's house *if they hold firm the confidence and pride that belong to hope* (Heb 3:6).
- They are partners of Christ, *if only they hold their first confidence firm to the end* (Heb 3:14).
- They are warned that Jesus as high priest is the source of salvation *for all who (continue to) obey him* (Heb 5:9).

The writer, however, is convinced that the addressees will respond in the appropriate fashion and show the needed perseverance (Heb 6:9; 10:39). This he prays for at the end of the sermon, asking God to make them complete in everything good, so that they may do his will, working among them that which is pleasing in his sight (Heb 13:21).

Look after one another

As indicated above, the addressees have the responsibility to look after the spiritual well-being of one another (cf. DeSilva 2000:68–69; Houwelingen 2013:110–111); they 'are to exercise communal care for one another' (Kleinig 2017:8); they have a '[c]ollective responsibility' (Allen 2010:263). Negatively, they had to ensure that none of their members turn away from the living God (Heb 3:12–13) or fail to obtain the grace of God (Heb 12:15–16), of which one of the first tell-tale signs was neglecting to meet with fellow believers (Heb 10:25). Positively, the addressees are called to provoke one another to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24).

Applying the writer's solution in the church today

Having determined which solutions the writer of Hebrews proposes for addressing his addressees' dwindling in their faith commitment, the article is concluded by a reflection on how the writer's solutions can be applied in the church today to address the phenomenon.

Various strategies, but one and the same aim

The writer of Hebrews employs a variety of strategies in his attempt to rekindle the flame of his addressees' dwindling in their commitment to faith. In order to lead them to a more comprehensive comprehension of their confessed faith and appropriate accompanying application, he shames, frightens, reminds, guides and assures them.

Modern ministers and pastors can consider making use of the same strategies in their contexts to address the phenomenon of dwindling faith commitment. The best line of attack will depend on the intricacies related to the specific problem in the modern congregation, as well as the specific context of the congregation.

Two of these strategies, however, have the inherent danger of being misused or abused by ministers, and of not being

favourably accepted by church members in the modern context. That is the use of honour and shame, as well as the strategy of frightening members to come to a renewed faith commitment. It should be kept in mind that the writer of Hebrews wrote to a specific (house) church he knew very well, as Hebrews scholarship is in agreement on. His strategies and arguments are not arbitrary and general, but context specific. A mere mechanical duplication of the strategies of honour and shame and the use of fear, and then base it on Hebrews, would be an injustice to the text. Moreover, the ancient context of honour and shame cannot be equated with honour and shame in the 21st century Western world. In the light of this, although these two strategies can be used in the modern church, it should be used with extreme caution.

Nonetheless, taking Hebrews as departure point, the aim of the strategies employed, should always be one and the same: to rekindle the dwindling faith commitment of church members.

The priority of a more comprehensive comprehension of the confessed faith, and appropriate accompanying application

To rekindle dwindling faith commitment, the church in the 21st century may follow the example of the writer of Hebrews by giving priority to guiding church members to a more comprehensive comprehension of their confessed faith and the appropriate accompanying application.

This is especially the case if Hebrews is taken as divinely inspired Scripture. In some cases, modern attempts to rekindle dwindling faith commitment may tend to reconcile the gospel with the dominant culture, or at least to water it down. Such a strategy would fly in the face of Hebrews, which, written to a house church who recently experienced persecution for their faith, and are still out of favour with the broader community, not only distances the church from the dominant culture, but guides the addressees to reach a deeper level of faith comprehension and application. Instead of looking for easy fixes or superficial remedies, the writer of Hebrews did what in his view was not only the best solution, but the only solution in the light of God's superior revelation in his Son: to guide the addressees to comprehend and apply their confessed faith even more fully.

In my view, this truly is the best solution that can be offered for a dwindling in faith commitment past, present and future.

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