

Introduction to Hebrews

*Jesus isn't merely **one** way to God; He is the **only** way to God.*

Do you agree or disagree with the statement above? It isn't very politically correct. In fact, it sounds very rigid doesn't it? Some would even call it "intolerant." Yet, according to God's Word, it is truth.

Those of us who embrace this truth are in danger of being labeled as "intolerant" and "narrow-minded." The world loudly proclaims that Jesus might be right for us, but not necessarily right for everyone. They "logically" argue that there are many ways to reach God. How should we respond to this as followers of Christ?

Today's culture pressures Christians to conform to its way of thinking. We can have our beliefs as long as we keep them to ourselves and don't try to push them on anyone else. If our faith influences the way we think or behave then the culture calls us "radical."

Many Christians today have succumbed to the pressure to "just fit in." According to a December 2008 poll by the Pew Forum, 52% of Americans who call themselves Christians believe that at least some non-Christian faiths can lead to eternal life. Did you catch that? Let me say it a different way: A majority of American "Christians" believes that you can make it to heaven without Jesus. Does that shock and sadden you? If not, it should.

These sad statistics are just one example of how Christians sometimes side with the world when conforming to Christ and His truth is too uncomfortable or difficult. As our culture increasingly becomes more intolerant of Christianity, it is vital that God's people commit to "non-conformity" with the world and its ways. The book of *Hebrews* offers timely wisdom and practical advice for those of us who long to glorify our Savior in a misguided world.

Purpose and Theme

The book of *Hebrews* is more of a sermon than a letter, written and delivered as a word of warning and encouragement for its first hearers. Obviously, the discouraged recipients were in danger of rejecting their faith in Christ. Based on the text, it seems they were tired of living outside the cultural mainstream.

What about you? Are you finding it difficult to resist conforming to today's society?

List some examples of how Christians conform to the culture around us.

What about you personally? Have you in some way compromised your faith in Christ by conforming to something in the world?

This group of Christians was holding back from complete obedience to Christ and even backing away from the faith. Their hesitancy to move forward had stunted their spiritual growth. They should have been growing spiritually but instead suffered from spiritual lethargy and immaturity (5:11-6:3). Fear of persecution or reluctance to separate from Judaism kept them from “eating solid food.” The author’s main purpose was to remind his hearers of the superiority of Christ and His work on their behalf and to urge them to continue strongly in their faith.

Are you discouraged in your faith? Are you growing spiritually?

Write a brief prayer to God that expresses your basic spiritual condition and ask Him to continue to work in your life.

Original Recipients

As mentioned earlier, *Hebrews* does not fit the traditional form of a letter. Without the regular opening and greeting of the biblical epistles we don’t have the benefit of being told by the author to whom he is writing. The traditional title, “To the Hebrews,” was added sometime late in the second century and was therefore, not a part of the original document. But this editorial comment is part of the evidence for the identity of the original recipients.

The Christians who originally received this sermon obviously had a rich Jewish background and extensive knowledge of the Old Testament. The book is packed with Old Testament symbolism and Levitical ritual. While some biblical scholars put forth arguments to support a Gentile audience, most scholars hold to the belief that the original recipients were primarily Jewish Christians. Apparently, many were considering rejecting Christ and returning to their Jewish roots. This was probably due to extreme cultural pressure and widespread persecution of

Christians. In the first century AD, the Jewish faith was accepted by Rome, but Christianity was not.

Biblical scholars' best guess for the location of the original recipients is Rome. Although the statement, "those from Italy send their greetings," in 13:24, could mean the letter originated in Rome, most scholars disagree. The earliest evidence of *Hebrew's* use in the ancient church locates the document in Rome. Therefore, the document was probably sent to Rome from a location where Christians from Rome then lived.

Like the original recipients of Hebrews, do you have fears and concerns that hold you back from being completely committed to Christ and living a life of total obedience? What are they?

Date

Like identifying the original recipients, setting a date for the writing of *Hebrews* is strictly an educated guess based on the evidence. The book of Hebrews was well known and quoted by church fathers before the end of the first century AD so we know it had to have been written before the turn of the century. However there are clues within the book that help us narrow it down a little more.

The tabernacle and sacrificial system are central motifs in *Hebrews*. Because the author never mentions the destruction of the temple, the date of writing was probably before 70AD when the Roman army invaded Jerusalem.

It is clear that the recipients had suffered persecution because of their faith. The author qualifies this persecution in 12:4 with the statement "have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." Most scholars believe this reveals that although the recipients faced persecution they had not yet experienced martyrdom.

Emperor Nero certainly opposed Christians, but by the late 60's AD his persecution was brutal, bloody, and very deadly. Christians also suffered during the earlier reign of Emperor Claudius, but his persecution did not include death.

One last clue helps us come fairly close in establishing a date of writing. The original recipients and the author of the letter were "second generation Christians." According to 2:3, they did not hear the Gospel directly from Jesus but rather from those who heard it from Jesus. Considering the evidence, many scholars date the writing of *Hebrews* in the early 60's AD.

Author

The author of *Hebrews* does not identify himself. Although several early church fathers leaned toward Pauline authorship, a majority of today's biblical scholars believe someone other than Paul was the author. First, the style of *Hebrews* is very different from the style we know as Paul's. Additionally, the presence of the High Priesthood theme, which is very prevalent in *Hebrews*, would be unusual for Paul.

However, the biggest piece of internal evidence against Pauline authorship is the information given us by the author in 2:3. Like the audience, the author heard the Gospel from someone other than Jesus. Paul would never claim this. In fact, Paul often testified that Jesus spoke to him directly. But if Paul didn't write *Hebrews*, then who did?

Even though the author does not clearly make himself known, there are several things we can determine. He was a dynamic preacher who was knowledgeable about the Old Testament and its interpretations. He was highly educated and a committed minister of the Gospel of Christ. He was probably a "he" because of the use of a masculine, personal pronoun. Some recent suggestions include Barnabas, Apollos, Philip, and Silvanus.

Like the biblical scholars, we can make some educated guesses. But since only God really knows whom He used to pen the book of *Hebrews*, it is best for us to plead ignorance.

Content

The author of *Hebrews* alternates between exposition and exhortation. He expounds greatly on the person and work of Christ, beginning with Christ in heaven. Then he brings Him among humanity and finally exalts Him to our great High Priest. *Hebrews* centers on Christ and His sacrifice for sinful humanity. The author also helps us understand the Old Covenant (and therefore the Old Testament) in light of Christ and His work. Christ is supreme!

The author's exhortation passages seek to motivate his hearers to a response. The exhortations give "warning and encouragement," and "punishment and promise." They concern issues of falling away, sin, and the need for endurance and obedience. The author uses both positive and negative examples of biblical characters to teach his readers.

Christ is superior. If the original hearers of *Hebrews* fully grasped this truth expressed so eloquently by the author, then they never left their Christian faith to return to their Jewish roots. In fact, as Nero's persecution heated up in Rome, some of them may have even laid down their life as a testimony to their great Savior.

What about you? Has your life been impacted by the superiority of Christ? Are you willing to be labeled "radical" and "intolerant" or simply "weird" by the world? Express your concerns to God in a prayer below.