

The Three Audiences of Hebrews: MacArthur's Framework

Subject: Hebrews — Supplementary Interpretive View

Companion to: The Book of Hebrews: Authorship, Audience, and the Warning Passages

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The four interpretive views surveyed in the companion Hebrews document each approach the warning passages from a particular theological angle. This supplementary document focuses on one specific framework that does not fit neatly into a single category — a view known as the Three Audiences interpretation, or the Three Groups framework.

It is a highly specific lens designed to account for the severity of Hebrews' warnings without concluding that a genuine believer can forfeit their salvation. Understanding it requires understanding both the man who formalised it and the theological concern that drove him to do so.

Primary reference: Dr. John MacArthur, Hebrews: Moody New Testament Commentary (1983); MacArthur's expository sermon series on Hebrews.

The Origin of the Three Audiences View

While earlier dispensational and Reformed commentators had noted that first-century churches were mixed communities containing both true and nominal believers, it was Dr. John MacArthur — pastor, theologian, and prolific biblical commentator — who formalised the three-group division into a systematic interpretive framework.

He laid it out explicitly in the preface and introduction to his 1983 commentary on Hebrews, and developed it further across an extensive expository sermon series on the book. His framing was pointed and practical:

“If one does not keep these groups in mind, the book becomes very confusing.” — Dr. John MacArthur

MacArthur's framework emerges from a commitment to Classical Calvinist theology — specifically the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, the conviction that a genuinely regenerate believer will never finally fall away from saving faith. The warning passages of Hebrews present an immediate challenge to that conviction, because they speak of people who were enlightened, who tasted the heavenly gift, who shared in the Holy Spirit — and who then fell away. The question every interpreter must answer is: who are these people?

MacArthur's answer is that they are not Group 1 — the genuinely saved. They are Group 2. And that distinction is the hinge on which the entire framework turns.

The Three Groups

According to MacArthur, the author of Hebrews is constantly shifting his address, speaking to three distinct groups of Jewish people who co-existed in or around the same first-century community. Reading the book well means recognising which group is being spoken to at any given moment.

Group 1: Hebrew Christians — The Genuinely Saved

Who they were: Jews who had truly trusted in Jesus as the Messiah and were born again by the Spirit.

Their condition: Spiritually genuine but immature. They were struggling to fully separate from the Levitical rituals they had practised all their lives, and facing severe social persecution and rejection from family and community within mainstream Judaism.

The message to them: Encouragement and theological grounding. The author writes to demonstrate that Christ is superior to angels, to Moses, to the Levitical priesthood, and to the entire old covenant sacrificial system. The aim is to reassure these believers and urge them forward into full spiritual maturity.

Group 2: Intellectually Convinced but Uncommitted — The “Almost” Christians

Who they were: Jews who had heard the gospel, witnessed the signs of the early church, and were intellectually persuaded that Jesus was the Messiah — but who had never made a personal commitment of saving faith. They stood at the edge, never fully crossing over.

Their condition: Suspended and unstable. Under pressure from persecution and social exclusion from the Jewish community, they were in real danger of pulling back from the light they had received and returning to traditional temple Judaism — the system they knew and in which they still had standing.

The message to them: The severe warning passages. This is where MacArthur locates Hebrews 6:4–6 and 10:26–29. These individuals have been genuinely exposed to truth — enlightened, having tasted, having witnessed the Spirit’s work — but they are not regenerate. If they turn their backs on Christ now, having seen what they have seen, there is no other sacrifice available. The warning is real, urgent, and addressed to people who are not yet saved but are running out of time.

Group 3: Unconvinced and Unpersuaded — The Unsav

Who they were: Mainstream Jews who had encountered the gospel and remained either hostile or simply unmoved, continuing in traditional Judaism without any significant movement toward Christ.

Their condition: Settled in unbelief. Unlike Group 2, these individuals were not teetering on a threshold. They had heard and not been drawn.

The message to them: Rational, systematic argument. Sections of Hebrews are addressed to breaking down their confidence in the old covenant by demonstrating its inherent incompleteness. The Levitical priesthood was always temporary. Its sacrifices could never finally remove sin. Jesus is not a departure from the covenant — He is its fulfilment and its goal.

Why This Framework Was Developed

The theological pressure that gave rise to this framework is not hidden. MacArthur is explicit: the Three Audiences view exists to protect the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints from the apparent challenge of the Hebrews warning passages.

The logic is straightforward. If the people described in Hebrews 6:4-6 are genuinely saved believers, and the text says it is impossible to restore them to repentance after they fall away, then either true Christians can lose their salvation or Christians who fall away face a hopeless, unrecoverable condition — neither of which sits comfortably within Reformed theology.

By attributing the warning passages exclusively to Group 2 — people who were illuminated and intellectually persuaded but never truly converted — MacArthur resolves the tension. The warnings are not addressed to the truly saved at all. They are addressed to people who are close to salvation but have not yet crossed over, for whom rejection of Christ at this stage carries catastrophic and irreversible consequences.

Hebrews 6:4-6 “For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit... and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance.”

The descriptions — enlightened, tasting the heavenly gift, sharing in the Holy Spirit — are real experiences, MacArthur argues. But real experience of spiritual truth is not the same as regeneration. Judas walked with Jesus, witnessed his miracles, and preached in his name. That proximity was not salvation.

How This Relates to the Four Views

The Three Audiences framework is best understood as a more granular version of the Calvinist "False Professor" view surveyed in the companion document. Both locate the warning passages outside the category of genuine believers. Where MacArthur's framework goes further is in its structural claim: that the book of Hebrews itself is organised around these three distinct audiences, and that tracking which group the author is addressing at any given point is the key to reading the whole book coherently.

Readers who hold Arminian, Free Grace, or Covenantal interpretations will dispute both the structural claim and the identification of Group 2 as the target of the warning passages. But the framework has proven widely influential, particularly in Reformed and dispensational evangelical circles.

Summary

Whether one accepts MacArthur's framework or not, it asks a question every reader of Hebrews must eventually face: when the author writes "we" and "you" and "those who," who exactly is in view? The answer shapes everything that follows.

Source

MacArthur, John. Hebrews: Moody New Testament Commentary. Moody Publishers, 1983.

MacArthur, John. Expository sermon series on the Book of Hebrews. Grace to You. gty.org
