

## Were the people to whom Hebrews was written genuine believers?

Some of the people to whom the letter was written had developed the habit of staying away from the meetings of the Christians. If that meant they were going back to Judaism, and if going back to Judaism meant denying the deity of Jesus, considering his blood common and insulting the Spirit of grace, how should we regard them? Were they true and genuine believers in the Lord Jesus Christ?

At first sight the answer might seem obvious: you can't deliberately and knowingly deny the deity of the Lord Jesus, deny the atoning value of his blood, and still be a genuine Christian, a true believer in the Lord Jesus.

But we mustn't be hasty in our judgment. The great Apostle Peter himself at one stage, overcome by panic, denied the Lord Jesus and used all the oaths and curses he knew to convince the bystanders that he was not a Christian. But he was, of course. Outwardly he denied the Lord, but in his heart he remained a believer, as we know from our Lord's statements and from what subsequently happened (see Luke 22:31–32). His faith did not fail, and he came back to the Lord. Could it not be that some of these Hebrews under pressure of persecution were temporarily behaving inconsistently as Peter did—outwardly going back to Judaism, though at heart still believers?

On the other hand, if Peter had carried on for the next ten or twenty years denying the Lord, avoiding the company of Christians, and taking his place fully in official Judaism, how could you have continued thinking he was a believer? After all, if someone himself consistently says he is not a believer, and demonstrates that he is not by deliberately denying all the fundamentals of the Christian faith, and shows no sign of remorse or of coming back to the Saviour, what's the use of our trying to say that he is a believer?

But then if that is what some of these Hebrews were doing, or were in danger of doing, it raises another question. Were they ever true and genuine believers in the first place?

Many people feel they must have been, but that is not necessarily so at all. Consider a parallel case.

The Apostle John in his first letter (1 John 2:18–19) refers to people who not only for some time professed to be believers and were members of a Christian church, but even, it appears, had played the role of teachers in it. Eventually, however, they abandoned the fundamental, apostolic doctrines, denied that Jesus was the Christ and left the church. John's comment is that in spite of earlier appearances, they never had been true believers at all. 'If they had belonged to us', he says, 'they would have remained with us'. Their departure from the church and from the apostles' fellowship revealed, according to John, that none of them had ever 'belonged to us', that is, been genuine believers.

Some argue, of course, that these Hebrews must have been believers at one time because the writer says explicitly (Hebrews 10:29) that they had been sanctified by the

blood of the covenant even though now they were in danger of denying Christ. And you can't be sanctified, they assume, without being a genuine believer.

But again, this assumption is not necessarily correct. Scripture itself indicates that there are senses in which you can be sanctified without being a believer. First Corinthians 7:14 says that the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife. Notice how impossible it would be to substitute the word 'justified' for 'sanctified' in this statement, for no-one can be justified without faith. But obviously there are senses in which people can be sanctified without being genuine believers.

Let's look again at Hebrews 10:29. It speaks of our Hebrews having been sanctified by the blood of the covenant. It will help us understand this phrase if we remember that their ancestors in the desert had similarly been sanctified by the blood of the old covenant. Moses, we are told, took the blood of the calves and the goats and sprinkled both the book itself (i.e. the book containing the terms of the covenant) and the people, saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant which God has enjoined on you' (see Exodus 24:5-8 and Hebrews 9:18-20). So they were sanctified by the blood of the covenant. But in spite of that most of them later refused to enter the promised land.

And what did that show? It showed, says our writer, who recalls this incident in great detail, that they did not believe the gospel. They never had believed (see Hebrews 4:2 and Numbers 14:11, 22). Similarly, then, these Hebrews had professed to believe in the Lord Jesus, and to accept the new covenant, and they had taken their stand with the Christians and had separated themselves from the murderers of the Messiah (see Acts 2:40). They had been sanctified by the blood of the new covenant. But as with their ancestors, so with them, that still leaves open the question whether they had ever genuinely believed the gospel. And it was precisely this that their behaviour was beginning to put in doubt.

We should observe how carefully the writer chooses his words when he recalls their initial experience of Christianity. At Hebrews 6:4 he talks of 'those who have once been enlightened' not 'saved', mark you, but 'enlightened'. At Hebrews 10:32 again he says, 'Remember those earlier days after you had received the light' —not 'after you were saved', or 'after you believed', but 'after you received the light'. So once more at Hebrews 10:26: 'If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth . . . not 'after we have believed the truth', or 'have received the love of the truth', but simply 'have received the knowledge of the truth'. And it is all too possible to know the truth without believing it.

Granted. Yet many people still feel that other phrases which the writer uses elsewhere imply quite clearly that his readers were, or at one time had been, true believers. He may not use the actual word saved, but he uses other equivalent terms which imply the same thing.

Well, later on we shall investigate these terms in detail. But for the moment let us notice that the writer himself tells us explicitly how he assessed the spiritual history and state of the people to whom he was writing. We had better let him speak for himself.

After describing the sad fate of those who, after being enlightened, go back to Judaism, he remarks, 'Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation' (Hebrews 6:9). That makes his position very clear. He is speaking as if they were not saved, although in actual fact in his heart of hearts he feels sure they are. He thinks indeed that he can see evidence in their lives that they are saved; things, as he puts it, that accompany salvation. But he is speaking as if there were no evidence that they had genuinely been saved. He will take no risks. A whole generation of their ancestors had professed to believe Moses and God, but in the end it became apparent that they had never believed the gospel. So he holds up their experience to warn his readers against—not ungodliness, or worldliness—no, against something more serious than that: unbelief. You see, if you have never believed the gospel, you are an unbeliever, whatever spiritual experience you may have subsequently had.

Therefore we shall find, as we read this letter, that the one great cardinal point that is stressed time and time again is the all-importance of faith. 'My righteous one will live by faith', declares Hebrews 10:38, and chapter 11 follows with a whole forty verses on the utterly indispensable requirement of faith.

This then is the question this letter will confront us with: are we genuine believers? Do we really believe that Jesus is the Son of God? And are we behaving in everyday affairs and especially in religious contexts in a way that is straightforwardly consistent with our professed belief? 'Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God,' says Scripture (1 John 5:1). And all who so believe will find tremendous encouragement in this letter to the Hebrews. It will remind them that God's word and God's oath give them a hope like an anchor for the soul, undrifting and firm. Every believer is secure (Hebrews 6:17–20). It will urge every believer to take courage and 'approach the throne of grace with confidence' to find 'mercy' for past mistakes and failures, and 'grace' for the future (Hebrews 4:16). Even if, like Peter, they have been inconsistent and have fallen and temporarily denied the Lord who redeemed them, they have a high priest who prays for them as he prayed for Peter that their faith shall not fail (Luke 22:32). And because he ever lives, 'he is able to save completely all who come to God through him' (Hebrews 7:25). He will not lose one true believer. Indeed, everyone who rests only and altogether on the sacrifice of Christ is assured that 'by one sacrifice' for sin 'he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy' (Hebrews 10:14).

So none of us need be uncertain, or insecure, or debilitated by doubts about the completeness of our salvation through Christ. This very letter abounds with assurances that every believer, however weak, shall certainly be saved. But its powerful and insistent question will be: Do you really believe? Not, 'Have you made a profession of being a Christian?' But, 'Are you a genuine believer?'

And so we shall be led to ask ourselves: is our behaviour consistent with the gospel we profess to believe? Is our faith for salvation in Christ alone, or partly in him and partly in some ritual or sacrament? Is he our sole mediator with God, or are we compromising our faith in him by relying on other mediators as well? Are we

intellectually loyal to Christ? Or do we, while professing faith in him for salvation, allow ourselves to hold theories that by implication deny his divine authority in other areas? Are we allowing our background and culture to pressure us into continuing practices that are inconsistent with the gospel we profess to believe? Do we really believe that Jesus is the Messiah-King and is coming again to reign? And are we taking up our cross and bearing his reproach, or compromising with the world that crucified him? Does our pursuit of holiness make it clear that we are genuine believers in the true grace of God? Or are we trying to mix faith in Christ with a permissive lifestyle that changes the grace of God into a licence for immorality?

If we are genuine believers, Christ will save us completely. But then, if we do really believe, others will be able to see evidence in our lives that we are believers, 'things that accompany salvation'.

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