



Sinners wilfully

"For if we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins."

Hebrews 10, verse 26

The "difficult text" is taken from the Epistle to the Hebrews. The particular difficulty which it throws up is that it seems to be teaching that it is possible for those who believe in Christ to commit sin to such a degree or of such a nature that they place themselves thereby outwith the provision of God for sin, that is, the sacrifice of Christ and therefore, must perish eternally.

The difficulty, of course, is caused by the fact that there are other texts of Scripture which encourage us to believe that the Christian is eternally secure, for example, our Lord's teaching in John 10:28: *"And I give unto them eternal life: and they shall never perish, neither shall anyone pluck them out of my hand."*

There seems to be a contradiction here, but only an apparent one. For, if we believe that the Scriptures are inspired by God, we cannot be content with any view which affords support to the charge of contradiction against the Scriptures. Hence the need to resolve this seeming contradiction.

Another need that requires a resolving of this "difficulty" is the anxiety or insecurity which the above understanding of the text might arouse in the hearts of some Christians. Let us take a closer look then at this text to see exactly what it is teaching.

The purpose of the Epistle

One of the basic rules for helping us understand any text of Scripture is to look at it in its context, that is, the passage or chapter or even the book in which it is found.

In this instance, the text is found in an Epistle which, in all likelihood, was addressed to Hebrew Christians who, because of persecution, were in danger of forsaking their new-found faith which they had professed, and of relapsing back into their former Judaistic religion. It is this particular temptation and the solemn consequences of yielding to it that is the burden of concern in this Epistle.

It is for this reason that the letter is punctuated throughout with exhortations, appeals, and warnings. *"So great indeed is the danger confronting the readers and so critical their situation that the writer throughout the letter alternates doctrinal instruction and earnest exhortation to an extent unique in the New Testament"* (Tasker). The Epistle has even been called "The Epistle of Warning".

All this helps to cast light on our text for its warning does not stand alone but forms part of a series of such warnings throughout the Epistle. All these warnings are related to and address the one and the same danger — the danger of apostasy.

The immediate context

If we now turn to the more immediate context, we shall find that this suggested interpretation of the particular sinning in mind, is further substantiated.

The conjunction "for" connects the verse with the preceding passage — verses 19-25 — where, having shown the privileges belonging to those who profess faith in Christ, the author urges the Hebrew Christians to hold fast the profession of their faith and to maintain their fellowship with

other believers by joining with them in their worship and performing their duties. This is immediately followed by the phrase *"for if we sin wilfully etc."* This, therefore, must be understood as conduct which violates the preceding. That is, a cessation of their profession and a forsaking of the fellowship is to be regarded as *"sinning wilfully"* and as amounting to deliberate apostasy.

This is further corroborated if we look at the verses which immediately follow. There, the *"wilful sinning"* is compared to the despising of Moses' Law for which there was no mercy (v. 28). This particular *"wilful sinning"*, however, is even more heinous still and, therefore, deserving of *"much sorer punishment"* (v. 29). Its evil character is spelt out as nothing short of treading underfoot the Son of God, counting the blood of the covenant an unholy thing and doing despite to the Spirit of grace (v. 29).

Acting "wilfully"

The wickedness of this conduct is further emphasised by characterising it as "wilful".

This does not mean that this particular sin was done with the will in contrast to some other sin or sins not involving the will.

"All sins are voluntary, but some are committed with but little reflection and scarcely a perception of their evil character; whilst others are perpetrated against the clear light of conscience and with a distinct perception, at the moment, of the holiness of the law which they violate. Every sin of this kind is not apostasy, but apostasy is pre-eminently a sin of this kind. Other deliberate sins are wilful violations of some particular precept of Christianity; apostasy is a wilful abandonment of the whole system."

(Lindsay)

Furthermore, this abandonment is conceived of, not as a temporary lapse, but as a continual and persistent habit. This is the import of the present tense in which the action is expressed.

This, then, is the nature and spirit of the *"wilful sinning"* contemplated in this verse. It does not refer to sin in the general but in the particular. And the particular sin in mind is the sin of apostasy: the deliberate, intelligent and persistent abandonment of the faith of the Gospel.

The consequences

When the action or state contemplated is viewed in this light, it prepares us somewhat for the awful pronouncement which follows, namely, *"there remains no more sacrifice for sins"*. These Hebrew Christians were well aware of the necessity for sacrifice in order to remove sin, for *"without shedding of blood there is no remission"* (9:22).

Furthermore, it had been proved to them both by teaching and from their own experience that it was *"not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins"* (10:4). Hence the necessity for the death of Christ by whose blood alone is remission, and whose sole sacrifice has done away with the need for any further offering for sin (10:18). The deliberate rejection of *"so great salvation"*, both in its grace and efficiency, not only constitutes the highest act of ingratitude, but is indisputable proof of the utmost unworthiness. More solemnly still, it incurs damnation, for it rejects the only provision for salvation from sin. To deliberately turn away from this is to *"draw back unto perdition"* (10: 39). There is no other alternative.

Who sin wilfully?

The frightening nature of the sin and its awesome consequence gives real urgency to the inquiry regarding the identity of those contemplated as being capable of committing this kind of sin. The author describes them as those who *"have received the knowledge of the truth"*. "Truth" must be understood here as the final and absolute word or revelation which God has spoken in His Son, Jesus Christ (1:1-2) — the full revelation of the way of salvation as revealed by and in the Lord Jesus Christ, who by His life, death, resurrection and ascension has done away with the shadows and symbols of Judaism, and has provided the fullest, the clearest, the highest and the only redemptive knowledge of God. It is the real Gospel, a full Gospel and an unadulterated Gospel which they have received.

Furthermore, they are described as receiving not only the truth but its "knowledge". They not only received accurate information or teaching but they were affected by it and passed through certain experiences as a consequence. They were enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, were made partakers of the Holy Ghost and experienced the powers of the world to come (6:4-5). Convinced of the truth and excellency of the Gospel, they had forsaken their Judaism and readily professed their belief of the Gospel, the classes for further instruction in which they eagerly joined (see 6:1-2). The zeal and credibility of their profession had been amply evidenced in their readiness to endure reproaches and the spoiling of their goods for the sake of their new-found faith (10:32-34).

Difficulty of identification

Such a description of their character and experience, however, far from being decisive as to their identity, has left Christian opinion divided down through the ages, depending on which theological school one belongs to. The Calvinists generally deny that those described above were genuine believers. The Arminians, on the other hand, maintain that they were true believers and that the Epistle warns that even they can become apostate and lose the salvation they once possessed.

That this last conclusion, namely, that true believers can become apostate and so perish, flatly contradicts the teaching of Scripture generally and of our Lord in particular when He says "*they shall never perish*" (John 10:28), compels us to reject it. It likewise makes the other analysis that genuine believers are intended — suspect at least.

Nevertheless, as Lindsay points out in his comments on 6:4-6: "*It must be confessed, however, that the language of the passage under consideration is exceedingly strong and it is undeniable that individuals exhibiting the features of character here described would be universally considered as disciples by men. But the decisive question is whether they would all necessarily appear such to God or whether in some cases the features might exist and yet the root of godliness be wanting. The deficiencies of professing Christians are often such as human eye cannot discover but God sees every heart... We must, therefore, conclude that, while the features described would, in the great majority of cases, be really attended with inward sanctification, they are yet not infallible marks of grace, and may in some cases be found where the soul is really a stranger to godliness.*"

This surely is the warning of the passage and not that genuine believers can be lost. Such teaching is not unique to this Epistle but can be found throughout the writings of the New Testament. Above all, our Lord teaches it, especially in the parables of the Foolish Virgins and the Sower (Matthew 25:1-11; Mark 4:1-20; compare Matthew 7:21-23).

This is why Hughes states: "*The sin of apostasy, then, is a grim (and far more than a merely hypothetical) possibility for persons who, through identification with the people of God, have been brought within the sphere of the divine blessing. They may be baptised as Simon Magus was, occupied in Christian labours as Demas was, endowed with charismatic gifts, preachers even, healers of the sick and casters out of demons, and privileged to belong to an inner circle of disciples as Judas was, and yet their heart be far from the one they profess to serve.*"

The difficulty resolved

If we approach the problem of the identity of the readers in the light of the above, it avoids the theological difficulty of contemplating the possibility of genuine believers being lost and also removes any ground for anxiety on this score. For it is a historical fact as well as the clear teaching of Scripture that the Christian Church or community has always included the counterfeit as well as the genuine. There is a counterfeit experience which can lead to a counterfeit profession not necessarily due to deliberate deception but to self-deception. A person can sincerely profess to be a Christian and give certain evidences which would seem to substantiate that claim not only for themselves but for others, so that, as Lindsay pointed out above, "*they would be universally considered as disciples by men*" — and we might add, justifiably so, in so far as men can competently judge.

Nevertheless, such profession and such judgement, however sincere, can be mistaken and the error only come to light in some crisis such as that which overtook the Hebrew Christians. More solemnly still, according to the teaching of our Lord in the parable of the Foolish Virgins, the error may not even be discovered until the coming of the Lord either at death or at His second advent.

If we bear in mind, then, the distinction between a profession of faith, even a sincere profession, and the actual possession of faith, and take seriously the consequent mixed character of the professing membership of any Christian Church or community, then we shall avoid the mistake of removing both the warning and the danger sounded out in the Epistle, from the realm of reality into that of the imaginary or hypothetical. Such treatment would make the passage describe an imaginary state of affairs and merely show what would happen if the impossible were to happen — a genuine believer to become apostate and perish eternally. *"There is no evidence whatever that the writer was describing an imaginary danger which could not possibly threaten his readers"* (Marshall).

Hughes puts the matter more strongly still when he says that this would be *"little better than the invention of a bogey for the purpose of frightening them into being better Christians. But the end does not justify the means, and to resort to subterfuge and deception, and that too within so solemn a context, would be sub-Christian and incompatible with the whole tenor of the Epistle. What, in any case, would be the point of warning them of the danger of apostasy and then assuring them that, after all, they are in no danger of falling into apostasy? Any such procedure would be self-defeating."*

The lessons

Only when we view the readers, then, as a mixed congregation of sincere professing believers can we, on the one hand, do full justice to the relevance of the warning and the reality of the danger, and, on the other, preserve inviolate the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer or the final perseverance of the saints.

Such then is the solemn teaching of this text and it demands to be taken seriously by every professing Christian. It warns against presumption and against abusing doctrines such as the eternal security of believers. It urges us to give every *"diligence to make our calling and election sure, for if you do these things you shall never fall"* (2 Peter 1:10). Anyone tempted to dismiss this lesson would do well to heed Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 10:12: *"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall"*.

One final point which is relevant to this whole discussion, but which editorial remit will not allow me to develop, is this. In the light of the possibility of counterfeit experiences and professions due to self-deception and which can endure throughout a lifetime, can there be any assurance or certainty of salvation in this life?

The point is well answered by the *Confession of Faith* in chapter 18, section 1:

"Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of living in the favour of God and estate of salvation; which hope of theirs shall perish; yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God; which hope shall never make them ashamed".

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