

IRRETRIEVABLE APOSTASY

Problem Texts (10)

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'It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy . . .'
(*Heb. 6:4-6*).

In any series of problem texts, this passage from Hebrews 6 is bound to figure. It is not that the writer expresses himself obscurely: his meaning is all too plain. The trouble is probably that the plain meaning of his words is unacceptable; they must surely (it is felt) mean something different from what they appear on the surface to mean.

This is not the only place where the writer expresses himself to the same effect: later he says that 'if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgement . . .'
(*Heb. 10:26,27*).

Is apostasy really possible?

The question to be faced is simply this: is apostasy a real possibility, or not? If it is a real possibility, then what is the situation of someone who, having once acknowledged the crucified and risen Lord as his only Saviour, later renounces him with the same deliberation or publicity as had marked his profession? 'Apostasy' is the RSV rendering, but it is scarcely to be doubted that this is what is meant by the 'falling away' of A.V.

The writer is giving a real warning against a real and abiding danger. It simply will not do to say with Kenneth S. Wuest that the construction here indicates 'a hypothetical case, a straw man', and that the sin in question 'cannot be committed today since no temple and no sacrifices are in existence, and no transition period obtains'. Scripture is not given to the setting up of straw men; and it does not require temple or sacrifices, or a transitional period of the kind envisaged by Dr. Wuest, for men and women who have named the name of Christ to develop 'an evil heart of unbelief' and 'fall away from the living God' (*Heb. 3:12*).

It is impossible, says our writer, to restore such persons again to repentance. And why? Because 'they crucify

the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt'. If they repudiate the redemption procured by the cross of Christ, it is impossible to find redemption anywhere else. The words 'since they crucify' represent a participle in Greek, and some would like to translate the participle by a time clause: 'it is impossible to restore them again to repentance *so long as* they crucify the Son of God on their own account.' But that is such a truism as hardly to be worth saying.

Eternal security or final perseverance?

One objection to this way of understanding the writer's words is that it conflicts with the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer. But can the people envisaged be described as believers? Whatever they once were, they are certainly not

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believers now: they are unbelievers. Moreover, the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer is better expressed by an older form of words: the final perseverance of the saints. This older form of words is preferable for one thing because it reminds us that the saints are the people who persevere: continuance is the test of reality. Other biblical writers emphasize the same principle: 'They went out from us', says John, 'but they were not of us: for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us' (*1 John 2:19*). In our Lord's parable of the sower, the seed sown among thorns and the seed sown on stony ground began to manifest the same promising signs as the seed sown on good soil, but not for long; they could not stand the test of time.

Paul's teaching is to the same effect: 'let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall' (*1 Cor. 10:12*). That is why he reminds the Corinthians of the wilderness generation: they were redeemed from Egypt, they were baptized in the Red Sea, they ate the bread of God—and yet 'they were overthrown in the wilderness' (*1 Cor. 10:1-5*). Paul had no doubt that the great majority of his Corinthian converts were genuine believers and that Christ indwelt them; but it was possible that some might be 'reprobate' or 'counterfeit', and he urged them to test themselves to make sure (*2 Cor. 13:5*). To be counterfeit is not precisely the same as being guilty of apostasy, but it amounts to much the same thing in the end.

Spiritual blessings no ground of security

Another difficulty that is felt about *Heb. 6:1-6* is that the people envisaged there started off with such wonderful spiritual experiences—including participation in the Holy Spirit. True, but did they experience any greater spiritual blessings than Simon Magus received? Yet the apostle Peter discerned that he was still 'in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity' (*Acts 8:23*). The receiving of spiritual blessings in itself may generate that pride which goes before destruction; it is not by spiritual blessings but by faith that we stand. 'So', in Paul's words, 'do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you' (*Rom. 11:20,21*).

Were they ever born again?

But—a final question often asked about *Heb. 6:1-6*—the people described in these verses: they could never have had the root of the matter in them, could they? How should we know? We are not told. To say positively that they were, or were not, regenerate would be to pronounce a verdict possible only for God, who reads the heart. It is for our health that we are not told, so that we may see to it that 'we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls' (*Heb. 10:39*).