
Can a Person Believe In Some Sense But Not Be Saved?

There are different levels of belief, and different objects of belief, and not all that's called "belief" is actually saving faith. James 2:19 says, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." So, if a person simply believes that there is a God in heaven—and that's the extent of his faith—then he has exactly the same faith as the demons of hell. That's not saving faith, even though it involves a measure of belief. Therefore, yes, a person can "believe" in some sense but not be saved.

Simon the sorcerer in Samaria is said to have "believed and was baptized" at the preaching of Philip (Acts 8:13). But later, when Simon offers the apostles money to have their ability to impart the Holy Spirit (verses 18–19), he is rebuked sternly by Peter: "May your money perish with you. . . . You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God" (verses 20–21). Was Simon saved, based on his "belief"? Before we answer that, we should acknowledge the difficulty of building a doctrine on a narrative passage in Acts.

Such passages were never meant to be extrapolated into foundational teachings, and we are not necessarily given all the facts we need to make a doctrinal determination. Concerning Acts 8, some would say that Simon lost his salvation (a view that contradicts other passages, such as John 10:28–30). Others would say that Simon's initial belief was not genuine—he was never saved to begin with. And others might say that Simon was truly saved but, having a deficient understanding of the Holy Spirit, made a horrible suggestion. After Simon was rebuked, he seems to have some measure of repentance (verse 24). We are not told how the story ends. Our conclusion is that Simon did not lose his salvation; either he had made a false profession or he offered a horrible suggestion out of ignorance and greed.

It is quite possible for a person to have an initial positive response to the gospel without being saved. He may feel his heart stirred at the stories about Jesus. He may even identify with Christ through baptism and church membership and get involved in ministry—all the while not being born again. We see instances of this in Scripture (Matthew 7:21–23; 13:24–30) and in everyday life.

We can illustrate the disconnect between some kinds of "belief" and saving faith this way: many Americans are overweight, and at the same time there are thousands of weight-loss products available. People will see an infomercial about the latest home exercise equipment, and they say, "That's just what I need!" and they buy the equipment. They receive their purchase and eagerly use it—for a couple of weeks. Six months later it's back in the box packed away somewhere. What happened? They believed in a product, but it wasn't the type of belief that led to lower body weight. Nothing really changed in their lives. They had an initial positive response, but rather than possessing genuine "faith," so to speak, they were merely indulging a passing fancy. People do this with Christ as well (see Matthew 13:5–7).

In Matthew 7:21–23 Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

Notice here that the people Jesus condemns were actively involved in ministry, but they were not genuine believers. They had faith of a sort—they acknowledged who Jesus is—but they had no relationship with Him. Jesus does not say that at one time He knew them, but then He later rejected them. He says, "I never knew you." They were never saved to begin with.

Another passage that shows people "believing" without being saved is Jesus' first parable. The parable of the sower in Matthew 13 highlights the various responses that people have to the gospel (the "seed"). In verses 5–7 we see

that “some [seed] fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.” Here two of the “soils” had an initial positive response—the seed sprouted but never matured. The picture here is not that these people were saved and then lost salvation but that their initial response, as joyful as it may have been, was not genuine.

The book of Hebrews and the warnings contained therein can be also understood this way. The recipients of the epistle were Jews who had come out of the synagogue and joined themselves to the Christian community. They “believed” a lot of things about Jesus, but at least some of them were not saved. Their mental acknowledgement of Jesus had not resulted in commitment to Him. When the persecution of the church began, the “fence-sitters” were tempted to abandon Christ and go back to the old Jewish sacrificial system. The writer of Hebrews compares them to the generation that came out of Egypt but refused to enter the Promised Land. Although they started on the trip with Moses (an initial positive response) they refused to enter because of unbelief (Hebrews 3:19). Hebrews chapters 6 and 10 issue warnings against so-called belief without salvation.

In John 6, after Jesus feeds the 5,000, many people turn away from Jesus and no longer follow Him (John 6:66). Jesus then asks the Twelve if they will abandon him as well. Peter answers that they could never leave their Lord (verse 68). Then Jesus says, “Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!” (verse 70). The “devil” here is Judas Iscariot, who would later betray Jesus. What’s interesting is that we see Peter and Judas side by side. Both expressed faith in Christ. Both “believed” in the sense that they knew Jesus personally, they saw the miracles, and they had committed years of their lives to Him. But the level of their “belief” was different. Peter would later deny Christ, but after the denial Peter repented and became a pillar of the church (Galatians 2:9). Judas, on the other hand, betrayed Jesus and never repented, although he realized that he had made a mistake and was sorry (Matthew 27:5). Judas is never presented as a disciple who lost his salvation; rather, he is one who had never truly believed unto salvation (see John 6:64).

Peter denied Christ, but only for a short span of time in his life of faith. Judas affirmed Christ, but only for a short span of time in his life of unbelief. Neither Peter’s denial nor Judas’s profession was indicative of the underlying condition of their hearts—a condition that was eventually made evident (see Matthew 7:16). We see similar professions in the church sometimes. Some people seem to be on fire for God for a short time, only to later repudiate what they believed and abandon themselves to a blatant violation of biblical principles. They did not lose salvation; they never had it—they were simply going through a “Christianity phase” that eventually passed. (See 1 John 2:19)

God knows our hearts. We, however, cannot see the hearts of other people and may often be deceived about our own hearts as well. That’s why Paul writes, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” (2 Corinthians 13:5). If we want confidence about our spiritual situation, we need to do more than look back to some words we said in the past when we “accepted Christ”; we need to also examine our current condition to see if there is evidence of God’s work in our lives today—changing us from within, convicting us of sin, and drawing us to repentance.

Church discipline (see Matthew 18:15–18) forces the issue. If a professed believer is living in open sin and no one ever confronts him, then he can remain on the fence. If he is confronted by one, then by two or three believers and then by the whole church, he has to decide. Either he will admit he is sinning and repent, thus giving evidence of his salvation, or he will decide that he never really wanted to be part of this life in Christ anyway and exit the situation. One way or the other, the situation is clarified.

The epistle of 1 John is important because it provides many signs of saving faith, so that we can know that our faith is genuine (see 1 John 5:13). Also, believers have the gift of the Holy Spirit, and “the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:16).

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