

## Secret Believers

HN/SS 08/01/06am

Reading: Genesis 12, Matthew 10:16f

Study Text: John 12:42-43

Sing Psalms: 34:1-7, 34:8-15, 142:1-5, 138:1-4

If you were to attend a student Bible study in India sooner or later the topic of secret believers would arise. The scenario may be something like this. A student from a non Christian family came to believe in Jesus during a student camp. He was about to return home for summer vacation. What should he say to his parents? They may well get angry and throw him out of the house. They may stop paying his college fees and/or cut him out of the will. His confession of Jesus would bring the family name into disrepute, and his sister's marriage prospects would be jeopardised.

Should this young person tell his family that he now believes in Jesus, or should he wait for some time? What would you advise him? And what if he feared his family would kill him? The question may not arise in our Bible studies but we can face similar situations. There are organizations and workplaces that do not welcome Christians. There are people, even family members who want nothing to do with believers. Do you keep quiet so as to get that job or to keep harmony in the family?

## Jews Who Believed

Jesus did many works of wonder and spoke many words of wisdom in His very public ministry. Many Jews did not believe in Him as we saw last time (12:37). The Pharisees and priests in the ruling council in particular hated Jesus. They had determined to kill Him at the first opportunity. They saw Him as a threat to their positions and their power over the people.

Exercising that power they made a rule – anyone confessing that Jesus was the Christ will be put out of the synagogue (7:13; 9:22). This was tantamount to exclusion from society and life in exile, for the synagogue was the only place for Jews to worship in Jerusalem. If they were excommunicated they could not go to another church down the road. Because of this threat most people feared the Jewish leaders. Even if they believed in Jesus they were reluctant to say so openly.

Before we look at secret belief we must consider what it means to believe or to have faith. Clearly people either believed or did not believe in Jesus. With every miraculous sign there were those who believed and those who did not. Yet even with those who believed, Jesus was reluctant to commit Himself to them (2:24). He saw many who believed and followed Him; later turn away (6:66). Sometimes faith in Jesus can be spurious.

Even as we consider secret believers we might also remember that there are those who are false believers. There are times when it expedient to believe in Jesus. When the Roman emperor Constantine, became a Christian the church grew rapidly – but were they true believers? Even today it is expedient to be a Christian to get a job in some schools, or in some employment agencies. Jesus was aware of spurious faith.

What about the belief of those in the passage before us? *Even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him lest they should be put out of the synagogue* (12:42). How are we to understand this belief? In the context it appears to be more than just a fascination with Jesus' miracles. The problem was not shallowness or doubt but one of fear.

If we include Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea in this category we see men who did finally step forward to give Jesus a decent burial (19:38f). Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to Jesus by night, said to Him *we know you are a teacher come from God* (3:1, 2). Later he spoke in defence of Jesus, or of justice at least (7:50), but he did not confess Jesus openly. Joseph was a *disciple of Jesus but secretly for fear of the Jews* (19:38).

## To Deny Jesus

Can a believer deny Jesus? It is one thing to remain quiet and not confess but another to deny Jesus. Under severe persecution and threat of death can we deny Jesus? Jesus says *whoever denies me before men, him I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven* (Matthew 10:33). And the apostle Paul also says if we deny Him, He will deny us (II Timothy 2:12).

Many Christians have been ordered to deny Christ on threat of death. Some have refused and died for Christ. Polycarp was ordered by the Romans to curse Christ but replied ‘eighty six years have I served Him and He has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?’ With that he died in the flames. Would you ever deny Christ?

What about Peter you may ask. He denied Christ three times. That he did, but then went out and wept bitterly (Luke 22:62). He repented and Jesus in his mercy later restored him. Cranmer was forced to sign a recantation during the reign of Mary but later repented of this sin. He went to the burning stake confessing Christ and holding forth his right hand with which he had signed that recantation for the Pope.

## To Not Confess

What then about keeping ones faith secret? Does this amount to denying Christ? Is it possible to be a secret believer or is this a contradiction in terms? Should not being born again lead to obvious changes in ones life? We have seen that Nicodemus and Joseph were secret believers. As Jews they were seeking to keep the law of God anyway so their life did not have to change greatly – although we have seen Nicodemus did protest against the injustice perpetrated against Jesus (7:51).

However, the life of a worldly person or an idol worshipper would change when they believed in Jesus. A believer could not keep on stealing (Ephesians 4:28) or getting drunk (Ephesians 5:18). A believer could not keep on worshipping idols in his home or in a temple. A believer would be worshipping God according to the Scriptures and with the people of God. Would not such a change in life lead to questions and to confessing Christ?

Some young converts we knew were told by their parents not to associate with Christians and not to go to church. Some were told not to bring a Bible into the house. They had to keep their Bible hidden and go to church secretly. Even when we are not trying to keep our faith secret it is good to bring our Bible to church.

How would you manage if your education, your job, your inheritance, was threatened because you were a believer? How would you manage if you lived in China or the Middle East where to carry a Bible or attend a Bible study might land you in prison?

## Whom Do You Fear?

John does not make a direct judgment on secret believers. He does not say you must immediately confess Jesus before all people when you believe (although we must keep in mind what Paul writes in Romans 10 – *if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*). John looks at the motivation. He examines the heart, asking why believers do not confess Jesus.

Fear of man is a major factor. One student did not tell his parents that he believed in Jesus because he feared his studies would be terminated, he feared he would be cut out of the will, he feared for his sisters marriage and even his own. Jesus said *do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul* (Matthew 10:28). Rather, fear God. God is all powerful. God is sovereign over all things even the hearts of men. If this student had confessed Christ his whole family may have believed and what a great blessings that would be.

Loving the praise of men is another reason why people do not confess Christ (12:43). These believing Jews feared being put out of the synagogue but also loved the position they held in this society. They were respected leaders holding power over the people. They loved this position and this power. It would all be lost if they confessed Christ. Of course they may have reasoned that God wanted them to be in this position of influence but they had to remain silent in order to do so. Esther could have remained silent also!

Lots of men and women have kept their faith in Jesus secret because they wanted to get a good job or a promotion, because they wanted to marry someone beautiful or rich, because they wanted to be elected to some organization or a place on a sporting team. *They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God* (12:43). You will not find such people strong in the faith. You will not find them growing in faith in Jesus Christ.

When Cranmer was forced by the Papists to sign a recantation in 1555, Fox tells us in his famous ‘Book of Martyrs’ that ‘now Dr Cranmer is a more miserable case, having neither inwardly and quietness in his own conscience, nor yet any outwardly any help from his adversaries. Besides this, on the one side was praise, on the other side scorn, on both sides was danger, so that he could neither die honestly not yet honestly live’.

Fear God not man, for God will never fail you. Look for the praise of God not the praise of man, for man’s praise is fickle and fleeting. Confess Jesus Christ as your Lord even if this brings difficulty and persecution in the short term. In fact such a confession will bring suffering as you struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. But it will bring praise from God and in the end his blessing and heavenly reward in Christ Jesus. Jesus said *whoever confesses me before men him I will also confess before my Father who is in heaven* (Matthew 10:32).

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