

Did Paul Sin?

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NOTE: Recent class study makes the material below, though written some years ago, still appropriate:

Did the apostle Paul sin when he purified himself for entering the Jewish temple according to the law? And, if it was not sin for Paul to associate with people in the practice of unauthorized religion, would it be proper for us to go with our associates in the practice of their unauthorized systems of religion? This is a perennial question arising from the instance recorded in Acts 21:17-29. Actually the question seldom arises from an unbiased mind as he studies this passage. It arises as he looks to this in justification of the practice named above; that is, the engaging with associates in unauthorized religious systems and practices.

SIMILAR OCCASIONS

There is no specific statement to the effect that Paul did or did not sin. There are some things, however, which we can learn about it. The Jews, in the practice of their religion, gathered in the synagogues for reading and studying the law of Moses on the Sabbath day. Though the law which commanded the observance of the Sabbath had been abrogated, Paul frequently went to these Sabbath gatherings. To some he might appear to be continuing to observe the law, but the record shows that the Jews who were observing the law had it made clear to them that Paul was not in agreement with them, that he was not observing it as they did (see Acts 13:14, 44-50; 16:13-15; 18:4-6; 19:8, 9).

QUESTION: When you go with associates to a place where unauthorized religious practices are engaged in, do you make it clear to them then and there that they are in error? Until you do this, do not even begin to think that your case is similar to that of Paul. Instead of sinning in the Sabbath synagogue affairs, he showed them what their sin was.

The Jews, under the instruction of the law of Moses, circumcised their male children. But circumcision has not always been and is not now merely a religious practice. It was also a racial practice then and today is also a health practice. In these senses it is comparable to the washing of hands. Jesus does not condemn all washing of the hands; he condemns the practice as a religious act. When Timothy became a companion of Paul in travel and work, Paul had him circumcised. The Bible gives the specific reason for Paul's action here. It was not in observance of the law, but to keep peace and association with the Jews as a race, for the Jews knew that Timothy's father was a Greek (Acts 16:1-3), and Paul knew that Jews would have no dealings with an uncircumcised man.

In like manner, though knowing that it is a false religious system, the man out of social respect would remove his hat upon entering a Catholic house of worship.

EXAMPLES

It was not impossible for Paul to sin, even as it was not impossible for Peter to sin (see Gal. 2:11-13). But let us not charge the man of guilt until he is proved guilty. Just because I do not have the explanation for a man's action does not mean that I am justified in comparing him with another whose action is explained.

The Bible teaches us that we are to follow approved examples in the Bible (see 1 Cor. 11:1; Heb. 13:6; Phil. 4:9; 1 Cor. 4:17). When Peter erred, we are told of his error. But we are lacking in the specific statement that Paul sinned in the first instance of this article.

We do know, however, that it is wrong for us to have any part with erroneous religious systems and practices (see 2 Cor. 6:11-18; Heb. 13:10; 2 John 9-11). So why should we try to array the practice of Paul, for which we do not have specific explanation, against the plain precepts of the Scriptures? It must be for the purpose of justifying a practice which we know to be otherwise forbidden. And in such an effort we destroy faith in the reliability of the Bible as an unerring guide.

THE TRANSITION

Paul lived when the change occurred from the law of Moses to the gospel of Christ. In such transition periods there are usually preparatory stages and succeeding stages which belong completely neither to the former economy nor the successor. In preparation John preached baptism. It had not been a feature of the law. And there were differences between his baptism and the baptism of the great commission. When Paul went to Jerusalem, the law had been annulled, but he and the Jewish Christians had lived under it as a schoolmaster (Gal. 3:24), hence through this transition period some of the practices appeared to linger on. Perhaps this could be the explanation for his action. We know, however, that he did not make it necessary for gentiles or anyone else to keep the law (Gal. 2:14-16).

ATTENDANCE RECORDS

Averages	July	1980
Sunday morning	65	65
Sunday evening	49	32
Wednesday evening	44	27
Contribution	541.60	418.34