

Christianity Is the Same Religion Practiced by the Patriarchs

Acts 24:10-21; Galatians 3:17

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Greg L. Price

Christianity is the same religion as that which was believed and practiced by Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Daniel. Paul, speaking as a Christian in the New Testament, says he worshiped the same God as that of his forefathers from the Old Testament (“so worship I the God of my fathers” Acts 24:14). Thus, the religion and church of the Old Testament are essentially the same as the religion and church of the New Testament (the same God, therefore the same religion and the same church).

The Lord has through redemptive history in Scripture moved that one biblical religion and church forward from types, shadows, and promises in the Old Testament to the fulfillment, substance, and realization in Jesus Christ in the New Testament. God has made outward changes to the one true biblical religion and church moving from animal sacrifices, sacraments like Circumcision and the Passover, and holy days like Pentecost in the Old Testament to the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ, sacraments like Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and one holy day, the Lord’s Day, in the New Testament. Paul understood Jesus not as beginning a new religion, but as being the head of the one true religion and church of which Abraham, Moses, and David were all members (as was Paul himself and as are all of us).

Paul had been charged by Tertullus with four accusations before Felix, the Roman governor. From our text today, Paul responds to the four false accusations brought against him: (1) He Was Not Pestilent in Spreading Trouble (Acts 24:10-11); (2) He Was Not Seditious in Forming a Mob (Acts 24:12-13); (3) He Was Not Sectarian in Bringing Division (Acts 24:14-16); (4) He Was Not Sacrilegious in Profaning the Temple (Acts 24:17-21).

I. Paul Was Not Pestilent in Spreading Trouble (Acts 24:10-11).

A. As our text begins today, Felix “beckoned” (or literally, “nodded”) to Paul to present his defense against the accusations he has just heard from Tertullus (Acts 24:1-9).

1. You will recall that Tertullus began his accusations by flattering Felix with that which was false in order to receive a favorable verdict against Paul (Acts 24:2-4; Psalm 12:3).

2. Paul’s opening statement is not flattery, but simply a statement of fact (Acts 24:10). Felix had come to know the Jews (and particularly, the Jewish Sanhedrin) very well over the past several years as governor of Judea. Paul knew that Felix had witnessed their partiality, their injustice, and their deception. Since Felix was no stranger to the schemes of the Jews, Paul believed he would sooner get a fairer hearing before this pagan ruler, Felix, than he would before the Jewish Sanhedrin, and this explains why Paul “cheerfully” answered for himself before Felix.

B. Paul now makes it clear that he did not come to Jerusalem to stir up trouble like a pestilence or plague among the Jews contrary to the false accusation brought against him (Acts 24:5). Paul states in his defense that it was just 12 days ago that he arrived in Jerusalem, which takes in Acts 21:15-24:26 (at least 9-10 of those days had been spent under arrest). In fact, Paul states he came to Jerusalem not to stir up trouble among the Jews, but to worship the Lord (he states later on in Acts 24:17 another reason he came to Jerusalem, to bring a love gift or alms from the Gentile Churches to help the needy Jewish Christians in Jerusalem). Thus, Paul denies that he was a trouble-maker by declaring he came in peace to worship God.

II. Paul Was Not Seditious in Forming a Mob (Acts 24:12-13).

A. Tertullus had accused Paul of being “a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the

world” (Acts 24:5). Paul counters the charge of Tertullus by boldly declaring that when the Jewish mob was formed against him to kill him in the Temple, they did not find him in some verbal clash with Jews, nor was he gathering a throng of people together in order to mobilize a rebellion against Rome (whether in the Temple, in the synagogues, or in the streets of Jerusalem). If there was mob action, it was not he that was responsible, but the Jews that thronged him and sought to murder him on the spot. The second charge is denied by Paul that he was seditious in forming a mob against Rome.

B. Paul states that Tertullus and the Jewish Sanhedrin can only make false accusations against him, but cannot prove any of them (Acts 24:13). In fact, there was no attempt on the part of Tertullus to prove by way of witnesses anything that was charged against Paul. Paul reminds Felix that the Jews have proven nothing against him. If they have no evidence against him, they have no case against him. The light of nature (Romans 1) taught even the Romans: the right of the accused to face his accusers, and to be judged upon the testimony of credible witnesses.

III. Paul Was Not Sectarian in Bringing Division (Acts 24:14-16).

A. Tertullus had charged Paul with being “a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5). Felix would certainly have found the second charge of sedition to be something he should punish if true, but he was not about to get involved with religious matters that concerned only the Jews. Felix would have simply seen this charge against Paul to be an in-house squabble between Paul and the Jewish Sanhedrin. And that is likely why Tertullus raised it before Felix, so that Felix might turn Paul back over to the Jewish Sanhedrin and let them deal with Paul as they saw fit (which would no doubt had led to Paul’s murder).

1. Tertullus used a religious slur against Paul when he referred to Christians as “Nazarenes”. Nazareth held no significance at all to the Jews. It was a no-account town. And Jesus (to these Jews) was a no-account teacher that came from that no-account town, as was anyone that followed Jesus. This was an *ad hominem* attack to belittle him, not one that considered Christ’s claim to deity, his doctrine, his miracles, or his acts of compassion. How easy it is for us to dismiss the doctrine, worship, government, and character of a person by simply calling him a name (whether a “Steelite”, a separatist, a schismatic). Paul was called a sectarian (separatist) as was the learned and godly Samuel Rutherford by many of the ministers in the Church of Scotland:

[T]hough we go under the name of Protesters, separatists, hypocrites, unpeaceable, implacable [merciless—GLP] spirits, are made as the filth of the world, and the off-scourings of all things: yea, troubled on every side (in the streets, pulpits, in divers Synods, Presbyteries, &c. more than under Prelacy) yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed (*A Survey Of The Survey Of That Summe Of Church-Discipline, "Preface"*).

Let us, dear ones, not sinfully resort to calling other brethren names, but let us fairly represent and accurately challenge what positions are in error out of love for Christ, for His truth, and for our brethren.

2. Paul makes clear that he is not the sectarian who raised heresies and errors that brought division among the Jews. Paul states before Felix that he was identified with what he called “the way” (Acts 24:14). The designation, “Nazarenes”, was a slur, but “the way” is what Paul called the faithful church because Jesus had said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). The way of Jesus Christ was not heretical or sectarian, but was actually the one true religion and church that worshipped the same true God that the fathers and patriarchs worshipped in the Old Testament (Acts 24:14). Paul makes clear that the inspired Scriptures of the Old Testament were the very Scriptures he fully believed as a Christian (Acts 24:14). What Paul is doing here is taking the charge of sectarianism that was

unjustly brought against him and charging the Jewish Sanhedrin with actually being the sectarians that have introduced heresy in dividing Jews against Abraham, Moses, and David, who looked forward in faith to Jesus Christ (Abraham—John 8:56; Moses—Hebrews 11:24-26; David—Acts 2:29-31). The sectarians that are responsible for division within the church are not those who refuse to be moved from the truth of Scripture that our forefathers faithfully confessed and practiced in Confessions, Catechisms, and Covenants, but those who have moved the landmarks of our faithful forefathers (Proverbs 22:28). Paul was identifying himself with those that were faithful in history before him. The Jews had departed from the God of their fathers and were the real schismatics.

3. Note that Paul makes a direct connection between the God of the fathers in the Old Testament and his God. The God of Paul and the God of the Jewish Sanhedrin that hated Jesus Christ was not the same God (even as is now true—Judaism is a false religion, like that of the Jewish Sanhedrin). This is important as many who claim to be Christian look upon unconverted Jews as having a way to God that is not through Jesus Christ. The Church of God (of which Paul was a member) was altogether different than the Jewish Sanhedrin over which Jesus was not the Head. The religion of the Jewish Sanhedrin had fallen into apostasy from the religion of Abraham, Moses, and David. The religion of Jesus Christ alone was the religion of Abraham, Moses, and David.

4. Note the ways that Scripture connects the religion of the Old Testament to that of the New Testament as being the same religion.

a. Stephen calls Israel, “the church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38). Paul considers the Church of the New Testament to be a continuation of the Church of the Old Testament and likens that one church to a single person at different stages of development (Galatians 4:1-7)—in the Old Testament the church was like a child before coming to maturity and in the New Testament the church has come of age in Jesus Christ. The one church in Scripture is also likened by Paul to an olive tree whose holy root is the patriarchs, and yet in that one olive tree were the Jews of the Old Testament (many of whom were cut off due to unbelief) and Gentiles of the New Testament (who are grafted into it by faith).

a. Paul calls the church of the New Testament “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16), and “the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3); and Peter calls the church of the New Testament “a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9). The Lord Jesus was the Rock and Savior of the Old Testament Church as He is of the New Testament Church (1 Corinthians 10:4). The gospel of salvation and justification by faith alone were preached in the Old Testament as in the New Testament (Galatians 3:8). The Moral Law of God (as summarized in the Ten Commandments) is called “the royal law” for us in the New Testament (James 3:8). The covenant made with Abraham was a Christian covenant made in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:17). All of God’s covenants after the fall of Adam are expressions of the one Covenant of Grace revealing more and more of the wonders of God’s love to His elect and showing His justice to those who do not believe and reject His covenant (like a flower—seed, stem, bud, and finally a beautiful flower in the New Covenant of Christ’s blood). Thus, Paul makes clear he (and the Christian Church) had not fallen away from Abraham, Moses, and David, causing a division among the Jews—the Jewish Sanhedrin had done so.

B. Paul also testifies before Felix of his hope in the future resurrection of the dead (Acts 24:15). This is not a hope of simply New Testament Christians, but was also the hope of believers in the Old Testament (Job 19:25-26; Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2). Again Paul shows the continuity of the same religion from the Old Testament to the New Testament. The Sadducees denied this cardinal doctrine of the fathers. This hope is not wishful thinking (like “I hope it will rain tomorrow”). This is a confident, certain hope firmly built upon the promise of God (that as Jesus was raised from the dead with a glorious body, so will all those who are united to Jesus by faith—the first fruit and the harvest). Without the resurrection, there is no hope, but only gloom and doom. For if we are not raised, Jesus was not raised; and if Jesus was not raised we are all yet

in our sins and under the condemnation of God (1 Corinthians 15:13-17). The bodily resurrection is foundational to the Christian faith as it was to the faith of the Old Testament fathers. The Lord Jesus has given us every Lord's Day one day every week to celebrate His resurrection, and the certain hope of our own resurrection to glory. Without the resurrection, we might as well just eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

C. Paul testifies here before Felix as he had before the Jewish Sanhedrin that he exercises and works hard by God's grace to "always" endeavor to have a conscience that is void of offending God and man (Acts 24:15). Should this not be your goal as well? Inform your conscience by the Word of God and then live according to the truth before God and man. Not moving the boundaries when it is hard to stand for Christ, and not standing only when it is convenient and easy, but "always" seeking to walk before God so as not to offend Him by your life (private and public).

IV. Paul Was Not Sacrilegious in Profaning the Temple (Acts 24:17-21).

A. Tertullus had charged Paul with profaning the Temple in Acts 24:6 (presumably by bringing a Gentile into the Temple). Paul responds that he came to Jerusalem bearing love gifts (alms) for needy Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 24:17) and that he was peaceably in the Temple going through rites of purification ("to the Jews, I became a Jew" 1 Corinthians 9). It was not he that stirred up chaos in the Temple, but those who sought to murder him; and his accusers who were in the Temple should have been present before Felix and not the Jewish Sanhedrin who were not present (Acts 24:18-19). And Paul then turns to the representatives from the Jewish Sanhedrin that are present and challenges them to bring charges against him for anything he said to them when he appeared before their council in Jerusalem (Acts 24:20). The only thing that they could bring before Felix Paul says was his mention of the resurrection, which led to an in-house fight among them—nearly pulling Paul to pieces if Lysias had not intervened (Acts 24:21). Paul knows that Felix would have no interest at all in getting involved in this matter and bringing punishment against Paul over a theological matter like the resurrection. Thus, Paul has truthfully defended himself against the false accusations brought against him by the Jews before Felix. Next Lord's Day, we will (God willing) consider the decision of Felix.

B. I love so much Paul's testimony before Felix concerning his conscience in Acts 24:16. Paul works hard (by God's grace) at seeking not to offend God or man by not doing what he knows to be contrary to His law and doing what he knows is in agreement with His law. However, there will be times in which you will have to offend man (family and friends) in order not to offend God.

1. Paul's words do not mean that he never failed or sinned (Romans 7). But his words do mean that he sincerely applied all of the sanctified energy and grace of God to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil—to avoid the appearance of evil, rather than walking as closely as he could to the cliff before falling over, and rather than sporting with and playing with temptations you know have led you so many times in the past into besetting sins. To exercise yourself to have a good conscience before the Lord means reading the Scripture and meditating upon it daily, spending time in prayer and fellowship with the Lord Jesus daily, and renewing your covenant and obedience daily through faith, repentance, and love for God (His gospel and His commandments).

2. A true Christian (and not simply one in name alone) is one who hates offending the Lord (but finds delight in obeying Him), who is ashamed of offending Him, and who earnestly calls upon the Lord to work within him/her both to will and to do His good pleasure. Let us live before God with a clear conscience, knowing it is only possible through the finished work of Jesus Christ ("It is finished"). And His glorious resurrection guarantees it is finished and is paid in full.

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