

Teaching Sound Doctrine

Religious - But Wrong

Saul of Tarsus

There is a theory that is common in the world today that all who are sincere in what they believe in their religion will be acceptable to God. In other words, if a man is really religious, as the term is used, he will be eternally saved. It is our purpose to examine some events that are related in the New Testament in order that we may determine whether this theory is true.

First of all, let us look at Acts 7 and take note of what is happening. Here we find a man by the name of Stephen preaching to a group of people known as the Council of the Jewish people. In his speech Stephen reviewed the history of the Jews, and pointed out how they had resisted the Holy Spirit of God in the past. Furthermore, he accused the people who were listening to him of doing the same thing. These people became so angry they stoned Stephen to death because of the sermon he preached. The statement is made that the false witnesses who had testified against Stephen "laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." It is this young man we want to consider now.

Persecution of the Church

In the beginning of Acts 8 we read that Saul consented to the death of Stephen. We also read of a great persecution against the church at Jerusalem that caused all of the church except the apostles to be scattered abroad. It seems that this young man Saul was one of the "ring-leaders" in the persecution of the Lord's church. This is the statement of Acts 8:3-4: "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church entering into every house, and haling men and women and committed them to prison. Therefore, they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word."

As we read on, we see that Saul was not satisfied with persecution of the church at Jerusalem, but when his persecution caused the dispersion of the church into other parts, Saul began to seek a way whereby he could reach them elsewhere. Acts 9 starts out like this: "And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem."

Saul's Condition-Lost, But Sincere

Perhaps some are now ready to make some terrible accusations against this man Saul of Tarsus, and indeed he was one who was doing a terrible thing when he persecuted the church of Christ. Surely all can see that he was not living in the approval of God and Christ. He was lost! But now, let us read some things found elsewhere in the New Testament concerning this young man.

In, Philippians 3:5-6 this same man, after being converted to the cause of Christ and now much older, says this of his youth: "Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." Here, then, is a man now being guided by the Holy Spirit who makes the claim that he was so zealous in his religion that he persecuted those who were opposed to what he believed. Surely if sincerity and zeal in religion are enough then Saul stood blameless in God's sight. We know this is not true. This man also said he was blameless under the law. He did not say he was sinless, but that he lived in accordance with the law of Moses, and made proper sacrifice for his sins according to the law. Yes, he was an honest, sincere and zealous young Jew who was doing that which he thought was the will of God.

There are other passages that bring out the sincerity, zeal, and determination of this man when he was walking in direct conflict with God's will. Some of these are Gal. 1:13-14; Acts 22:1-3; I Tim. 1:12-16; and Acts 23:1. Notice especially this last one: "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." He had made many mistakes during his life, but they had been honest ones. Is there one who advances the theory we are noticing, or one who reads this article, who could go beyond this claim for sincerity; or who could even go this far in complete honesty? Here is a man who exceeds all of our claims, for sincerity of religious conviction. According to the theory under consideration Saul was acceptable to God as he stood in the religion of the Jews!

Saul's Conversion

If we look into a the account of the conversion of this man Saul. We learn that he was on his way Damascus to bind Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for persecution, the Lord appeared to him in a great light, and asked him why he persecuted Christ and His way. When Saul determined who it was that was speaking to him, he asked Jesus what He would have him do. Jesus told him to go into the city of Damascus and there he would be told what he must do.

There is no greater example in all of the New Testament of a believing, penitent man than the fasting and praying Saul as he waited in the city of Damascus to be told what he must do. There are three accounts given in Acts of Saul's conversion, and in Acts 22:16 we read where Ananias, who was sent by the Lord to tell him what he must do, said; "And now why tarriest thou? arise and be

baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." Was this honest, sincere, and zealous young man who had believed and repented acceptable because of his honesty, sincerity, and zeal? Had faith already saved him? Paul himself says he had some sins of which he needed to be cleansed, and that baptism was the commandment given unto him that he must do to complete his obedience for remission of past sins.

Parents and Teachers Often Wrong

We have noted that the religion Paul was embracing as a youth was one that had been taught to him by his ancestors. When one's parents teach him that a certain thing is right, it is, often very difficult to convince him that it is wrong, even if it is really wrong. Not only had his ancestors been steeped in this religion, but Gamaliel, one of the most learned men of the day, had been his teacher. If our parents tell us something is right, and then some brilliant man backs up that doctrine, it makes it almost impossible for us to be convinced of anything else. This was the case with Paul. It may be true of you.

Notice though that Paul's religion as a youth was not just a man-made religion, but rather was something that had come from God. In addition to having the sanction of such men as Gamaliel, and his own relatives, Paul could point to God as the originator of the plan he was trying to follow. What he had not learned was that God had made a new agreement with men through His Son Jesus, thereby making the old one obsolete. Therefore, even though he was very religious; earnest, zealous, and sincere in that religion; he had to change before he could stand approved by the Lord Jesus. There was still something he must do.

What About Your Religion?

Even though YOU may be very religious, and earnest and sincere and zealous in that religion, there is still a very great possibility that you may be wrong. All of these churches that we see in our midst today cannot be right when they teach different doctrines of salvation for the souls of men. The Lord is the builder of only one church-there is but one body, which is the church. I Cor. 12:20 and Eph. 1:22-23. You may be able to point to the teaching of your mother and father, your grandparents, and great-grandparents; even to the "great doctors of religion" such as Gamaliel was, but this does not assure you that your religion is right. Remember, Paul could even point to the origin of his religion as being with God! He was still wrong.

If you are a member of a church that cannot be read about in the New Testament, one that was established by men hundreds of years after the New Testament was completed, even though you are highly zealous and sincere in that religion, it is still not the body of which the Lord would, have you be a member. Will you not consider the authority for your religion, as well as, the

fervor and zeal you have for it? Remember, Paul had to change his. Perhaps you need to change something about yours also.

Apollos

Once again we examine some passages relating to another man in New Testament times to determine the accuracy of the theory that says sincerity in religion is all that God asks of one in order that he might be saved. Remember that as we use the term religious we are using it in the sense that it is often used to designate an honest, sincere, and zealous feeling about one's convictions toward God. In other words, our question is this: Is it enough for a man to be religious?

We have already studied about a man called Saul of Tarsus, and later Paul, who was told there was something he must do in order to stand approved in God's sight. Now we want to see if the New Testament contains any more record of such need for change, or if Saul was some unusual character who had to be dealt with in an altogether different manner from ordinary men.

The Religion of Apollos

Lets turn now to Acts 18:24-28 and begin reading these words: "and a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John." First of all, we see the background of Apollos. He was a Jew; one of a group of people that God had chosen to be His people in a very special way; one of the group of people from which the Messiah was chosen to descend, and had descended. Furthermore, we read of the eloquence of this man. He was a man who had the power of voice to persuade men; one who could express his emotions in such a way as to move other men to do the things he thought best.

In addition, this man was mighty in the scriptures; one who knew what God had said in the writings of the Old Testament. Apollos was instructed in the way the Lord would have him go until God had put a new system into effect. Men were no longer to live by the law of Moses, but by the new covenant or agreement that God had put into force through His Son.

Not only was Apollos eloquent, capable of moving men; mighty in the scriptures, having a knowledge of the Old Testament; and instructed in the way of the Lord, knowing the way God had directed men to live under that old agreement; but we read that he was fervent in the spirit. He had burning zeal to do something about what he knew to be right. He was diligently speaking and teaching the things of the Lord. It meant enough to him that he felt a necessity of telling someone else. However, in his telling of the things of the Lord, there was a point beyond which

he could not go because of a lack of knowledge. He knew only the baptism of John.

John's baptism was designed to point people unto someone who was to come later, as it is explained by Paul in the next chapter, verse four. That one had now come, performed His mission on earth, left a baptism of His own to be submitted unto, and had returned to God. Apollos was not aware of some of the events that had transpired, and was thus ignorant of part of the way of the Lord.

Notice now the remainder of Acts 18. "And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly. And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace: for he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publickly, shewing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ." The synagogue of the Jews was a place where it was possible for people to study and learn the Jewish law. Apollos, being mighty in this Jewish law, and knowing of John and the baptism which he had proclaimed, was being very bold in his efforts to teach the people in this synagogue all he knew of the way of the Lord. I believe that all who read these lines would agree that Apollos was a religious man according to our use of the word.

Apollos Needed More Instruction

However, in spite of all this earnestness and zealousness in preaching all that he knew to proclaim to these people, he was in need of something more. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him speak and recognized the limitation of his knowledge of the way of the Lord, "they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly." There were still some things about which he needed additional knowledge.

Once again then we see a man who was a religious man according to present usage of the term, but yet a man who needed some further instruction in the way of the Lord. Is it possible that you, even though you may be religious, may need to learn the way of the Lord more perfectly? If you cannot read the things which you have believed and practiced in your religion from the word of God, then you do need to learn the way of God in a more complete sense.

Did Not Resent Instruction

Apollos did not become angry because someone came to him and taught him something that he did not know. As the incident is recorded, it would seem that he thankfully received the instruction from Aquilla and Priscilla, and became even more powerful in his ability to move men to do the things he had been taught from the will of God. All too often today, when one goes to another in an effort to show him more of what God has said, the one who is approached reacts

as though he has been insulted. It is not a disgrace or a shame for one to be ignorant of certain things, but it is shameful for one to delay and deliberately refuse to learn when God speaks to him.

Must Be Religiously Right

We see that Paul, or Saul of Tarsus,. was not the only man who was required to be more than just religious. We must be religiously right. My first question to you then is this: Are you religious? If so, another question: Are you sure you are religiously right? The only way we may be sure is to read what we believe and practice from the word of God. There are many people in our day who are extremely sincere and zealous in their religious lives, however, when those people believe and practice two or more things that are directly opposite in their religion, they cannot all be right. Someone is religious, but wrong.

Will you examine your religion and see if it came from the pages of the New Testament?