

'Paul Took A Vow At Cenchrea'

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This article is from the Gospel Magazine of November, 1869. In it the writer discusses and explains some of the events concerning Paul taking a Jewish religious vow in the book of Acts and how this should be understood by believers.

The Apostle in Romans 11:13 declared: 'I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles' but to trace out the dealings of God in bringing this about is interesting and instructive in the Acts of the Apostles. Persecution was the chief means God employed to widen the spheres of early missionary labour: Acts 11:19; 13:50; 14:5, 6; 17:4, 5. At Corinth the Apostle remained 'a year and six months', until the Jews made insurrection against him, and brought him to the judgment-seat—their persecution of the Gospel being as inveterate as that of the heathen. To mollify the Jewish enmity no doubt, the Apostle shaved his head at Cenchrea, and took a vow according to Leviticus 27. Hence we read, 'Paul purposed in his spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem' (Acts 19:21) in order to fulfil this vow. At Caesarea Paul was warned by the Spirit of prophecy in Agabus, 'Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles' (Acts 21:11). Paul purposed in his spirit to see Rome (Acts 19:21), but he little knew the winding way God was about to take in order to send him there. The joy of Christians at Jerusalem to see Paul we have told out in chapter 21:15-19. But the Apostle was now put upon his trial, for despite the verdict given by the first convocation of brethren that met at Jerusalem, and the letters sent through Paul to the Churches, as recorded in Acts 15, all of which set forth the great fact that Jewish forms and ceremonies were ended by the coming of Christ—yet was the great Apostle to the Gentiles caught in the trap of Jewish conformity, as we have, plainly stated, in chapter 21:20-26. At the suggestion of the Jews he went into the temple to give proof that he walked orderly and kept the law; and we read that 'Paul took the four men, and the next day purifying himself with them and entered into the Temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them'. This circumstance in Paul's history, and others of a similar character (Galatians 2:11), show to the children of God that, though regeneration is complete, yet illumination is gradual. But Paul had to learn his lesson out of a hard book, and with many stripes, for when the seven days of legality were ended, we read, 'that the Jews which were of Asia when they saw him in the temple stirred up the people and laid hands on him,' for this imaginary offence that he

had brought Greeks, and not four Jews, into the temple, (vv. 27, 28). At this the City was moved, and they took Paul and drew him out of the temple, and as they went about to kill him tidings came to the chief captain, and on his appearance they left off beating Paul, who was bound with chains, and lodged in the prison. On his trial, Paul declared himself a free man, and claimed the privilege of a Roman citizen, 'I appeal unto Caesar' and Festus's reply was, 'Unto Caesar thou shalt go'. By these unexpected and painful circumstances Paul reached Rome, which arose out of this apparently small beginning: 'He shaved his head at Cenchrea, for he had a vow' (Acts 18:18). But let us notice the use God made of Paul the while, in bringing him before both the Jewish and pagan authorities, so that in the presence of both he was to tell the story of his miraculous conversion, and preach the Gospel, though in bonds, both to Jew and Gentile (Acts 23:11).

In chronological order, the first epistle Paul penned was to the Galatians; and, when the Bible student reads that portion of scripture in the liberty of the Gospel, he will trace the enlightenment of the Spirit of God in the heart of the Apostle, which led him to expose the snares of Judaizing teachers, who would draw brethren back to legal observances, and neutralize the grace of God by setting up in part or in whole the covenant of works; hence he admonishes believers to 'stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage' (Galatians 5:1). We hear no more of a shorn head or legal vow. Paul had had his lesson beaten into him, and his testimony henceforth was 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us,' (Galatians 3:13). The Epistle to the Hebrews, written at a much later period, carries out the same truth, the fulfilment, and therefore, removal, of all the Jewish types and ceremonies. Christ, the sum and substance of the law, having by His own blood entered in once into the holy place and obtained eternal redemption for us, (Hebrews 9:12). Hence the 'carnal ordinances, imposed upon the Jews until the time of reformation' (Hebrews 9:10), were all swept away by the power and glory of the Gospel, of which the law was but the shadow, (Colossians 2:16, 17). The true use to make of Paul's vow is, not for example, or encouragement, but for warning! It shows us the dangers of a legal spirit, and the effects of compromise with error. The Apostle under the teachings of the Holy Ghost was led ultimately into the nature and character of the wide difference between Law and Gospel, and that all attempts to add to the perfect and finished work of Christ was a blow at the truth and struck at the very root of gospel liberty, (Galatians 2:16). We live in a day when this subject is of vital importance to the people of God, from the temporizing spirit abroad, which for the sake of peace and unity sacrifices the truth of God. But this is not the characteristic of the religion of Christ Jesus, who came not to send peace but a sword (Matthew 10:34), to set His people at variance with all that is opposed to Him, whether in the heart, in the home, or in the world.

With regard to enmity on the score of mere denominational differences, and the kindnesses of life that believers should show toward one another, we cordially agree with our friend and brother, that we have much to learn;

but let us have the right scriptures in the right place for our instruction in this matter: let us distinguish between things that differ, and while we trace faults even in an apostle, and the history of progress in the knowledge of the truth, may we, as humble followers of Christ, avoid where they fell, and 'stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free'.

But many may be ready to object, 'Did not Paul in an after-day declare "he was all things to all men, that he might gain some. To the Jew he became a Jew, that he might gain the Jews"?' The analogy of Scripture shows us that the Apostle's meaning here is, that he acknowledged he was a Jew to the Jews, even as he claimed the privilege of being a Roman Citizen to the Gentiles, of which he took advantage on his trial to appeal unto Caesar (Acts 23:6; 25:10). But Paul's catholicity extended no further than to 'the remnant according to the election of grace' (Romans 11:5); his limits were bounded by this experience, 'If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maran-atha' (1 Corinthians 16:22) and, with regard to the doctrines of grace, his verdict was, 'Though we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you that that ye have received, let him be accursed' (Galatians 1:9). In our day, union with error is called 'a good spirit'. Far be it from us to make a man an offender for a word (Isaiah 29:21), or impute all these conclusions to the few and friendly remarks of our brother; but God's people who love the truth as it is in Jesus are made to feel the evils so rife in our day, and that they are the solitary exception to a world-wide charity. There is no quarter given to Calvinism; of all sects and parties it is the most abhorred. Paul's vow did not screen him from persecution; and nothing short of concealing or denying the doctrines of grace will please a godless world. Let those who know and love the truth of God stand by it, be valiant for it, fight the good fight of faith, (1 Timothy 6:12) and leave to another period the fulfilment of the promise, 'Them that honour me, I will honour' (1 Samuel 2:30). Paul's vow only brought him into trouble; and all carnal attempts to please the world, or beguile them into a profession of religion, only weakens the influence of the truth as a separating and distinguishing principle; entangles the believer in worldly conformity; and lessens the experience and enjoyment of truth in the soul, till at last, like Ephraim, he gets broken in judgment, cannot see afar off, and forgets that he was purged from his old sins (Hosea 5:11; 2 Peter 1:9). Never was there a time when the Apostle's exhortation to the children of God was of more importance than the present: 'Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit ye like men, be strong' (1 Corinthians 16:13; 1 Kings 2:2).

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