

WERE THE JEWISH SYNAGOGUES AUTHORIZED BY GOD?

Dear Bro. Waddey: In a discussion about the Law of Silence, someone raised the question about Jesus reading Scriptures and teaching in synagogues. Apparently the word "synagogue" does not appear in the Old Testament as such, and only Temple worship was specifically authorized in the Old Law. Since Jesus was subject to the Old Law, the question is whether He participated in something (synagogue worship) not specifically authorized at the time. Those who raise this question are trying to get around the Law of Silence and claim that even Jesus did things not specifically authorized in Scripture. Was there any biblical justification for the synagogue in addition to the Jerusalem temple? Bill

Dear Brother Bill: In my American Standard Version of the Bible (1901) the word synagogue is found in Ps. 74:8. There the writer laments the fact that "They have burned up all the synagogues of God in the land..." The footnote renders this "places of assembly." It is conceded by all that synagogues came into existence during the Babylonian exile. When it was impossible for the people to assemble for worship at Jerusalem, they did the best they could and assembled for prayer, praise and study of the Law of God. Upon their return to Palestine they brought their practice with them. Prior to the captivity, sacrifice and designated holy days were observed in Jerusalem at the temple. However God had made provision for teaching in their local communities and other places as needed (Jer. 36:12-15). The people could consult the prophets in other places as needed (II King 4:38). The people were instructed to teach the law to their children (Deut. 6:7-9). When the Hebrews entered their land, specific territories were allotted to all the tribes save the Levites. They were scattered in cities throughout the other tribal states. That made them available to instruct the people as needed. (Josh. 21:20-42). So those who seek to prove there was no provision for such teaching are making large assumptions. You are correct in saying that this is but a dodge to avoid the clear teaching of the Bible that we are not to add to or take from the things God has authorized for us to do.

They fail to consider:

- That Jesus himself is the Creator of all things (John 1:3; Col. 1:16) and the I AM (John 8:58). He is the Lord of the temple and its worship. He demonstrated this by driving the moneychangers from the temple (John 2:14-16) and by declaring his new message to be a superior way than that of old times (Matt. 5:21-47). If he went to the synagogue for worship, it was not in any way wrong to do so.
- He who spoke to Moses in the bush (John 8:58) had the right to do as he willed. He did no wrong (I Pet. 2:22) and His way was that of truth (John 14:6). He did not violate his own law.
- They seek to justify their disobedience by appealing to something they don't know, i.e., that God did not authorize the synagogues. For example we have no example of Jesus offering sacrifices in the temple. Does that prove he did not? We have no example that he gave tithes of his income in the years prior to his ministry. But we would assume that he did so. Because he came not to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17).
- That Jesus went to the synagogue implies certain things: (1) That it was the right thing to do in that day and age. (2) That He found it an opportunity to teach those who were seeking God's will.
- They fail to see that it is always right for God-fearing people to assemble for prayer and study of God's will.
- The relation of the synagogue to the temple was similar to the relationship between the Lord's Day worship with communion and a mid-week Bible Class. We have no specific authority for the Class but we do have generic authority since we are told to read and teach God's Word and to grow in the knowledge thereof (Acts 17:11; II Pet. 3:18).
- They forget that in the ancient synagogue the Jews never used instruments of music. They were used only in temple worship where they were specifically authorized (II Chron. 29:25).
- They cannot deny that the Holy Spirit guided the biblical writers to show us that God indeed expects his people to do that which he instructs them to do and the danger of presuming to do something merely because he did not forbid that act (Deut. 4:2). For example Nadab and Abihu, Naaman, and Uzzah in the Old Testament and in the case of the Judaizing teachers (Acts 15:24 and the priesthood of Christ (Heb. 7:14).

I marvel at the ingenuity of rebellious sinners who are so determined to have their own way that they try to involve the Savior himself in their presumptuous behavior.

JHW