

The Ship of Theseus

In ancient Greece, there was a legendary king named Theseus who supposedly founded the city of Athens. Since he fought many naval battles, the people of Athens dedicated a memorial in his honor by preserving his ship in the port.

This “ship of Theseus” stayed in its honored position for many years. As time went on, some of the wooden planks of Theseus’ ship started rotting away. To keep the ship nice and complete, the rotting planks were replaced with new planks made of the same material. Here is the key question: If you replace one of the planks, is it still the same ship of Theseus?

What happens if you change two of the ship’s planks? Would that make it somehow less of the original ship than after one plank is changed? What if the ship consists of a hundred planks and forty-nine of the planks are changed? How about fifty-one changed planks? What about changing ninety-nine of the hundred planks?

Is the single plank at the bottom of the ship enough to maintain the original lofty status of the ship? And what if all of the planks are changed? If the change is gradual, does the ship still maintain its status as the ship of Theseus? How gradual must the change be?

What happens if we switch the old wooden planks for more modern plastic planks? Then, as we change more and more of the planks, the ship will be made of a different material than the original. What happens if the people who replace the planks make mistakes in putting in the new planks and the ship has a slightly different form?

Another question: Does it matter who is making all these changes to the ship—that is, whether one group of workers does it or another? If the ship is to be preserved for hundreds of years, then surely many different people will have to be making the changes. What if we make so many changes to the boat that it can no longer float out to sea? Can we still call it the ship of mighty Theseus if it cannot perform the same function as the original?

A common answer to some of these questions is that the ship remains the same because the changes are gradual. However, it is not clear why that should make a difference. How gradual must the changes be in order for the original ship to maintain its status? Is there a minimum speed limit for changes?

To put the question of what is “gradual” in perspective, consider the case of Washington’s ax. A certain museum wanted to preserve the ax of the founding father of the United States. The ax consists of two parts: a handle and a head. As time went on, the wooden handle would rot, and the metal head would rust. When needed, each of these two parts was replaced. As the years passed, the head was changed four times and the handle was replaced three times. Is it still Washington’s ax?

As a preacher, you can easily see the simple application to doctrinal purity. Biblical doctrine, unlike Theseus’ ship, does not rot away, however, there has always been those who seek to change the “planks” of the original. Just something to muse upon...

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