

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 4: The Ecclesiastical Trial of Jesus—The Preliminary Hearing

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Introduction

When we discuss the trial of Christ we are actually considering two separate trials: the one ecclesiastical, the other civil. Each trial consists of three separate stages. The Jewish trial involved: a) an informal preliminary hearing before Annas (Jn. 18:12ff.); b) an informal trial before the high priest Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (Mt. 26:57-68; Mk. 14:53-65; Lk.22:54, 63-65; Jn. 18:24); and c) the formal trial by the Sanhedrin (Mt 27:1; Mk. 15:1; Lk. 22:66-71). The reason there is so much maneuvering and preliminary discussion on the part of the Jewish leadership is that they had determined to have Jesus put to death *before* the trial began which was by no means an easy task. They had to figure out what to charge Christ with that was a death penalty offense. They had to find *false* witnesses to testify against Him and had to get an ecclesiastical conviction. Then, they had to formulate the charges in a way that would merit the death penalty before the Roman magistrate. The Sanhedrin did not possess the power of capital punishment (see Jn. 18:31). The death penalty was the personal prerogative of Pilate, the Roman governor.

The civil trial also has three phases. a) Jesus is placed before Pilate who asks some preliminary questions (Mt. 27:2, 11-14; Mk. 15:1-5; Lk. 23:1-5; Jn. 18:28-38); b) Pilate, who apparently does not want to have to deal with Christ, sends the Savior over to Herod (Lk. 23:6-12). (Jesus was from Galilee, Herod's jurisdiction, and Herod was in town for the feast.); c) Herod then sends Jesus back to Pilate who holds a formal hearing, releases Barabbas and condemns Christ to be crucified (Mt. 27:15-26; Mk. 15:6-15; Lk. 23:13-25; Jn. 18:39-40).

In the midst of the narratives of our Lord's trial, all four gospels record the three denials by Peter (Mk. 14:54, 66-72; Mt. 26:58, 69-75; Lk. 22:54-62; Jn. 18:15-18, 25-27). In addition, Matthew records the remorse and suicide of Judas the betrayer (Mt. 27:3-10; Luke tells us of Judas' end in Acts 1:18, 19). By placing Peter's denial in the midst of our Lord's trial, God is setting forth a sharp contrast between the Savior and Peter. Under extreme pressure Christ remains firm and faithful while Peter crumbles. The evangelists, writing under divine inspiration, repeatedly are willing to show the disciples in a bad light to: a) exalt the Lord Jesus Christ as the sinless Redeemer; ("Was it not suitable that He should first paint a *dark* background, so that the *perfections* of the Holy One might be brought into a sharper relief?"¹); b) magnify the grace of God by demonstrating that the best of saints are still in themselves moral failures; and c) demonstrate how and how not to respond to trials and temptations.

The trial of Jesus is another step downward into the abyss of humiliation and suffering. The Sanhedrin, which was supposed to be a model of justice and integrity, becomes the instrument of the greatest travesty of justice in all of human history. "The time and nature of its meetings, the manner in which the 'trial' was conducted, its strange outcome—all point to the

¹ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:173.

intent desire of the Jewish authorities to do away with Jesus. Here we have a group of desperate men who, while trying to keep a show of propriety and at least a semblance of ‘legality,’ take what can only be regarded as very desperate measures.”² These wicked men have no regard, whatsoever, for God’s holy law or justice.

Before Annas

Then the band and the captain and officers of the Jews took Jesus, and bound him, and led him away to Annas first; for he was father in law to Caiaphas, which was the high priest that same year. Now Caiaphas was he, which gave counsel to the Jews, that it was expedient that one man should die for the people.... The high priest then asked Jesus of his disciples, and of his doctrine. Jesus answered him, “I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing. Why askest thou me? Ask them which heard me, what I have said unto them: behold, they know what I said.” And when he had thus spoken, one of the officers which stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, “Answerest thou the high priest so?” Jesus answered him, “If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why smitest thou me?” Now Annas had sent him bound unto Caiaphas the high priest. (Jn. 18:12-14, 19-24)

After our Lord was arrested and bound He was taken to the house of Annas via the brook Kedron and was led into Jerusalem by the sheep-gate. The brook Kedron was the dumping ground of the blood and filth left over from the sacrifices from the temple. During the great feasts it ran red with blood. The sheep-gate was the entrance point for the sacrificial animals on their way to the slaughter. The Roman soldiers and temple police were completely unaware that by their unholy actions they were being used of God to fulfill “to the very letter the significant types which God had ordained in the law of Moses.”³

The fact that Jesus is taken to Annas prior to His appearance before the Sanhedrin raises a few questions. First, why does our Lord appear before Annas? And, second, what took place at this clandestine meeting?

The answer to the first question is found in the person of Annas himself. John explains it in terms of Annas’ relationship to Caiaphas: “for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was the high priest that year” (Jn. 18:13). This statement is the apostle’s way of telling us that Annas was an exceedingly powerful, perhaps the most influential person among the Jewish leadership. Annas was appointed to the office of high priest by Quirinius, the Roman governor in A.D. 6, and served in this capacity until the year 15 when he was removed by the Roman procurator Valerius Gratus. Under biblical law the high priest was to serve for life, but the Romans removed and appointed the high priest when it served their purposes. “With the money-changing and the sale of sacrificial animals, a high priest at this time could become a millionaire within a year, and would be a powerful and dangerous man. As a result, frequent rotations were made mandatory by the Romans.”⁴ Every man who served as high priest and was removed by Rome retained the title after his removal from office. (This practice of retaining the title for life is the same in the United States where all ex-presidents are addressed as Mr. President.) Annas had been removed

² D. A. Hagner, “Sanhedrin,” in General Editor, Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 5:272.

³ Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Greatest Trial on Record,” 9:97.

⁴ Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The Gospel of John* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2000), 245.

by the Romans because he was very capable and had amassed a great deal of influence and power in his position.

The thing that sets Annas apart from other ex-high priests was his ability to hang on to power after his official term. Five of Annas' sons and a grandson would become high priests after his term and Caiaphas, who served between two of Annas' sons, was married to his daughter. Thus, his family "had a monopoly of the high-priestly office during the period A.D. 17-41."⁵ Indeed, it is likely that Caiaphas became the high priest due to the power brokering and political maneuvering of his father-in-law. The influence of Annas is indicated in two passages by Luke. Near the beginning of his gospel he writes, "While Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness" (Lk. 3:2). Although there were a number of high priests between Annas and Caiaphas, Luke only mentions Annas because he still (albeit unofficially) held the reins of power. Likewise in Acts 4:5-6 when Luke describes the assembled Sanhedrin he lists Annas before Caiaphas, the "official" high priest: "And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest...."

Annas was the elder statesman of the Sanhedrin ("He was an old man of seventy."⁶) who not only held the reins of power, but was also thoroughly corrupt. D. M. Edwards writes,

Annas belonged to the Sadducean aristocracy, and, like others of that class, he seems to have been arrogant, astute, ambitious, and enormously wealthy. He and his family were proverbial for their rapacity and greed. The chief source of their wealth seems to have been the sale of requisites for the temple sacrifices, such as sheep, doves, wine, and oil, which they carried on in the four famous "booths of the sons of Annas" on the Mt. of Olives, with a branch within the precincts of the temple itself. During the great feasts, they were able to extort high monopoly prices for their goods. Hence our Lord's strong denunciation of those who made the house of prayer "a den of robbers."⁷

Even the Jewish Talmud ("The body of Jewish and canonical law, consisting of the combined Mishnah, or text, and Gemara, or commentary; also restrictedly, the Gemara alone."⁸), which was compiled long after the death of Annas, recognizes the corruption of Annas. It says, "'Woe to the family of Annas! Woe to the serpent like hisses' (probably the whisperings of Annas and the members of his family, seeking to bribe and influence the judges)."⁹

Now that we have an understanding of who Annas was, there are other related reasons why Jesus appeared first before Annas.

(1) Annas was a seasoned veteran in dealing with difficult cases. "This man would have been invaluable to Caiaphas in defining the arguments, formulating the charge, striking out

⁵ George R. Beasley Murray, *John*, 323.

⁶ James Stalker, *The Life of Jesus Christ* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1880), 128.

⁷ D. M. Edward, "Annas" in General Editor Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:128.

⁸ *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G&C Merriman, 1949), 867.

⁹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 388. Craig Evans writes, "[T]here is ample evidence that Jesus' contemporaries were critical of the Jewish high priesthood and regarded it as corrupt in various ways. We find such evidence in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where the high priest is dubbed the 'Wicked Priest' (1 QpHab. 1:13; 8:9; 9:9; 11:4-5), who has robbed the poor (1 QpHab 8:12; 9:5; 10:1; 12:10), has amassed wealth (1 QpHab 8:8-12; 9:4-5), and has defiled the 'Sanctuary of God' (1 QpHab 12:8-9)." (*Mark 8:27-16:20*, 165-166).

irrelevant matters, and in short, quickly directing the litigation to the main issues. The old man's advice would make the work of Caiaphas just so much easier."¹⁰

(2) Annas had a special hatred of Jesus and wanted to see Him in bonds under humiliation. The reasons for this hatred are found in our Lord's teachings and actions. On two occasions (see Jn. 2:13-22, Mk. 11:15-19; Lk. 19:45-48; Mt. 21:10-13), the Savior cleansed the temple's outer enclosure called "the Court of the Gentiles" of the money-changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals. Although people could bring their own animals to the temple to be sacrificed, long distances made this impractical for some and there was always the risk that the animals brought would not be approved by the priests. As a result, powerful priestly families such as Annas' set up an animal selling business at the temple complex and sold these pre-approved animals at exorbitant prices. Further, at the temple complex foreign money was not accepted as payment. The ruling families also took advantage of this by setting up tables in the courtyard where money could be exchanged. The money-changers charged a fee and as a result the high priests were making enormous profits off of God's people when they came to worship. Further, the areas where the Gentiles (the God-fearers) were permitted to pray were full of noise, filth and stench from animal manure.

When Christ entered the temple area he drove out all those who bought and sold, overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves and publicly rebuked the high priestly families for making the house of prayer into a den of thieves (Mt. 21:10-13). This was a stinging rebuke to Annas and His family. They took it as a personal insult and wanted revenge. Now with the Savior under arrest, Annas could gloat. In this unofficial setting, without the Sanhedrin, Annas, the power broker of the priesthood, could freely act the part of a Mafia boss to essentially communicate to Jesus: "How dare you challenge my authority? You are going to pay for what you have done."

(3) A practical reason why our Lord was brought before Annas first was the simple fact that time was needed to gather together the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin (the supreme court of the Jews) was composed of seventy-one members. A late night session of the court (or at least a quorum) would take time to convene. The members would have to be found, awakened and then convinced that a night session of the court (which was illegal) was necessary. This task was left to the official high priest Caiaphas and his comrades.

Annas' Question

What occurred before Annas is very interesting for it reveals how the Jewish leadership regarded Jesus of Nazareth. "The high priest [Annas] then asked Jesus about His disciples and His doctrine" (Jn. 18:19). There are a number of things to note regarding this question.

(1) The approach of Annas reveals the unlawfulness of the procedure against our Lord. The Jewish leaders had an obligation to make a specific charge against Jesus and then summon at least two credible witnesses to prove it. "One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits, by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established" (Deut. 19:15). Instead of providing credible witnesses, Annas wanted Jesus to give them what they needed for the prosecution. Barclay writes, "One curious feature of legal procedure in the Sanhedrin was that the man involved was held to be absolutely innocent, and indeed, not even on trial, until the evidence of the witnesses had been stated and confirmed. The

¹⁰ Klaas Schilder, *Christ on Trial*, 19.

argument about the case could only begin when the testimony of the witnesses was given and confirmed. That is the point of the conversation between Jesus and Annas in John 18:19-21. Jesus in that incident was reminding Annas that he had no right to ask him anything until the evidence of witnesses had been taken and found to agree.”¹¹

(2) The question about His disciples and doctrine is likely rooted in Deuteronomy 13:1-10. Annas was attempting to illicit information regarding Christ being a false prophet. Deuteronomy 13 warns Israel regarding people who claim to be a prophet and are even able to work a sign or miracle, yet who entice the covenant people to serve other gods (vs. 1-2). It also warns against teachers who *secretly* entice the people to go astray (v. 6). The clear teaching of Scripture is that all such people must be put to death (vs. 5, 9, 10). Annas and the other Jewish leaders could not deny the miracles of the Savior for they were abundant, unmistakable and public. Therefore, they would admit that signs were occurring, but assert that the Nazarene was enticing the people away from the true God, even *secretly* enticing Jews into apostasy. The Jewish leaders were so convinced of the truth of their corrupt, apostate religious system that they were attempting to force their own Messiah into the mold of the false prophet of Deuteronomy 13. By asserting His own divinity and gathering His own disciples, Jesus (in their view) was turning Jews away from Jehovah to a false god—Himself. They believed He was a dangerous false prophet and thus was responsible for leading many Jews away from the true faith.

(3) It is clear from Annas’ line of questioning that the Jewish leadership at this crucial time, after the arrest of Christ, still did not know what crime they going to charge Him with. They were improvising as they were going along. It was obvious to everyone involved that the Savior could not be charged with any sort of immoral act, so the only alternative was to focus on His teaching. They had to find evidence of Him either being a false prophet, a blasphemer or both; and, they had to find something in His teaching that could be construed as sedition against Rome.

(4) A number of commentators think that the question regarding the disciples is designed to humiliate Jesus, for Annas was well aware that His followers had all fled. Annas in effect is saying, “Where are your brave followers? If these men were so loyal, then where are they? If these disciples really cared about You, then why are they not here to testify on your behalf?” Interestingly, when the Savior does answer Annas, He doesn’t speak one word about His disciples. Why does our Lord completely ignore this aspect of Annas’ question? One obvious reason is that Christ is not obligated to answer unlawful questions by a wicked judge on a fishing expedition. Spurgeon notes another excellent reason. He writes, “Why this silence? Because it is not for our Advocate to accuse his disciples. He might have answered, ‘Well dost thou ask, “Where are they?”’ the cowards forsook me; when one proved a traitor, the rest took to their heels. Thou sayest, “Where are my disciples?” *There is one yonder*, sitting by the fire, warming his hands; the same who just now denied me with an oath.’ But no, he would not utter a word of accusation; he whose lips are mighty to intercede for his people, will never speak against them. Let Satan slander, but Christ pleads. The accuser of the brethren is the prince of this world: the Prince of Peace is ever our Advocate before the eternal throne.”¹²

¹¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel According to John* (Edinburgh, 1956), 2:58 as quoted in Leon Morris, *John*, 755 footnote 40.

¹² Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Greatest Trial on Record,” 9:99.

Christ's Response

Our Lord answers Annas in a calm, dignified manner, "I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said" (Jn. 18:20-21).

Jesus answers truthfully, boldly and perhaps even indignantly. In His answer He makes a number of points.

(1) The Savior emphatically ("With three emphatic *ego* Jesus states what he on his part has done"¹³) declares that His teaching was open and public to everyone. He preached the gospel to all Israel. That is, to everyone everywhere he went. He did not speak anything in "secret." Our Lord is denying that He is involved in any subversive activity because subversives, insurrectionists, revolutionaries and other such malignants do not broadcast their teachings and activities in a public forum. Only wicked persons hide what they are doing and teach in secret.

He says in effect: I have never been a prophet "of the desert" or of the "inner closet." To form a nucleus designed to work its way forcibly into the existing body of the church, state, and community by way of introducing an alien element into these, bent on eventually destroying them, is a law quite incompatible with the kingdom of heaven. I have done nothing, Christ means to say, other than to set free and to cause those seeds to sprout which God Himself had planted in the field of Israel. I have not planted two kinds of seeds, he asserts; I have introduced no germinal properties alien to the body of the people, but have under the full light of the sun wanted to cause the seeds, which the God of truth long ago planted in Israel's soil, to germinate. Hence secret doctrines and esoteric organizations are none of mine. I come not to break down but to fulfill.¹⁴

Our Lord is saying to Annas that since He had taught openly in all the public places frequented by the Jews and had not taught secretly, there was no rational or biblical reason for Annas to be asking such a question. "The right way to go about things, now that an arrest has taken place and the law set in motion, was to bring out the witnesses and let them tell their story."¹⁵ In a way Christ is respectfully telling Annas that his question is absurd and unnecessary. "If everything that I taught was public and nothing whatsoever was hid, then if I taught heresy you don't need My testimony for there should be hundreds of witnesses." Further, of what use would Jesus' testimony be if He was a liar, devil and false prophet as the Jewish leaders supposed. Annas, in the presence of the Messiah, was clearly in over his head.

As we consider our Lord's statement, keep in mind that He is not asserting that He never spoke to the apostles in private away from the multitudes. "What He means is that He did not have two kinds of teaching, a harmless one for the general public and a very different one for the secret revolutionaries."¹⁶ When, for example, the Savior privately explained certain parables to His disciples, He was only clarifying public statements. He was not setting forth anything new or unique. The gospel of the kingdom was public. In fact, the teaching of the Messiah in Palestine would be proclaimed throughout the whole world on the direct orders of the resurrected King (Mt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:15-18).

¹³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1199.

¹⁴ Klaas Schilder, *Christ on Trial*, 35.

¹⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 756.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

(2) Jesus also emphasizes that He preached in all the established places of public worship throughout Israel—the synagogues and the temple. That our Lord taught in the synagogues of Galilee is evident from the synoptic gospels (Mt. 4:23; 12:9; 13:54; Mk. 1:21, 39; Lk. 4:15, 16, 44) and John (e.g., 6:59). The gospel of John gives numerous instances where the Savior taught in the temple (e.g., 2:19; 7:14, 28; 8:20; 10:23; see Mk. 14:49). “The fact of His public teaching was notorious.”¹⁷ In Jerusalem He always went to the temple to teach. The reason for this was that He always sought the largest possible audience for His doctrine. This statement reinforces what our Lord said about the public nature of His teaching in a manner that emphasizes His use of God-ordained Jewish institutions. As if to say, “Not only was My doctrine set forth publicly and frequently in the visible church for over three years, but no one, whether an elder, teacher or church member has brought Me up on charges or demonstrated My teaching to be contrary to Scripture.

(3) Our Lord emphasizes and makes his point explicit by the question to Annas: “Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said” (Jn. 18:21). This statement is a direct challenge to Annas. “Why do you, the high priest, pretend to be ignorant of what is common knowledge of the people! You have had many opportunities to hear Me preach! You have expelled from the synagogue those who believe in Me.”¹⁸ Christ is essentially saying, “Let’s be honest here. Let’s not play games. The people know My teaching and so do you. If you are not sure about My doctrine, it would have been very easy to find out. Therefore, this arrest and interrogation is unnecessary and unlawful.” The Savior is telling Annas very plainly that He has absolutely no intention of testifying in this case or defending Himself under such circumstances. The Messiah who came to fulfill all righteousness will not and cannot cooperate in these unlawful and unjust proceedings. Christ is telling the high priest in no uncertain terms that he needs to obey the law of God. Having stated His reasons for not answering these questions, from this point on Jesus will say very little throughout the rest of the proceedings, both ecclesiastical and civil. “For the rest of the questioning our Lord Jesus said not a word in self-defense; he knew that it availed not for a lamb to plead with wolves; he was well-aware that whatever he said would be misconstrued and made a fresh source of accusation, and he willed, moreover, to fulfill prophecy, ‘He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.’”¹⁹

(4) By way of application, there are six things that these verses bring to mind. First, believers do not have a moral obligation to cooperate with a corrupt court or with unjust proceedings. With the majesty of the Son of God, our Lord asked for truth and justice. He was not evasive or dishonest. He asked the court to follow the biblical, lawful procedure for He had nothing to hide. Ryle writes, “The boldness and dignity of our Lord’s reply to Annas in this verse are very noteworthy. They are an example to all Christians of the courageous and unflinching tone which an innocent defendant may justly adopt before the bar of an unrighteous judge. ‘The righteous is bold as a lion.’”²⁰

Second, Jesus made it very clear that the truth of the gospel ought to be preached by His servants indiscriminately to the world. Gospel messengers are debtors to all men, for they do not know upon whom the Lord may make their ministry successful. Further, the gospel preached is a testimony against those persons who refuse to repent. As Paul says, “For we are to God the

¹⁷ J. H. Bernard, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2:600-601.

¹⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:183.

¹⁹ Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Greatest Trial on Record,” 9:99.

²⁰ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:265.

fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

Third, Christ focused His attention upon the synagogues and the temple; that is, “where the Jews always meet” (Jn. 18:20). Even though our Lord lived in a degenerate and corrupt generation, He still frequented places of public worship for the advance of the gospel. In this we see His commitment to the covenant people and His dedication to publishing His doctrine in every corner of Palestine. He even “published his doctrine among his most cruel enemies, where no doubt, he prevailed with some, John xii. 42.”²¹ The Savior teaches us, by His example, that truth must be preached even where there are dangerous opponents and many disadvantages. Faithful ministers can always expect some kind of opposition and trials.

Fourth, in Annas, we see the dangers of apostate leaders in the church. “Whenever the church, explicitly or implicitly, departs from Christ and the holy and inscripturated Word of God, the Bible, it departs from the truth and attempts to put Christ and His true church on trial.”²² All apostate church leaders throughout history hate the Nazarene and His message. This was certainly true of the popes of Rome who frothed at the mouth like wild dogs against the great saints of God such as John Wycliffe, John Huss, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Like Annas they were deaf to the teachings of Christ. They bowed the knee to pomp, ritual, adornments, riches, power and, with hearts of stone, they opposed the gospel and murdered the saints. Like Annas, their trials were marked by injustice, deceit and treachery.

Fifth, in Annas and Christ we see a stark contrast between the failure of the old priesthood and the success of the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. The Old Testament high priest had the most privileged religious position among all Israel. Only he had the unique privilege of entering the Holy of Holies once a year to offer sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. “The high priest’s responsibilities included all the sacrificial activities that took place inside the temple, either with his direct involvement or under his supervision.”²³ The priesthood was designed by God for the benefit of His people. Although everything connected with the priestly office was symbolical and typical, the underlying idea of the priesthood was easy to understand. The office focused on reconciliation to God through atoning sacrifice and mediation between a holy God and a sinful people. (“Even the Hebrew term for priest (*Cohen*) denotes in its root-meaning ‘one who stands up for another, and mediates in his cause.’”²⁴) Another important aspect of the priesthood was their responsibility in dress, ritual and actions to show forth the holiness of Israel. The high priest was supposed to be the greatest embodiment of all that the priesthood represented. Yet, in the days of our Lord, the high priests were white-washed tombs and sons of Satan.

Annas is proof that the priesthood and the role of mediator could not be left in the hands of sinful men. What was needed was the Melchizedek priesthood of Christ. Jesus was both God and man in one person. Because He was without sin, he did not need to offer sacrifices for Himself as the Old Covenant priests did (Heb. 9:7-15). There was no danger of Him ever failing and corrupting His role as mediator. Unlike the self-serving, corrupt priests such as Annas and Caiaphas, “[t]he Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give His life a ransom

²¹ George Hutcheson, *The Gospel of John* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1657] 1972), 381.

²² Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The Gospel of John*, 245-246.

²³ W. O. McCready, “High Priest” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 3:962.

²⁴ Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services As They Were in the Time of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 85.

for many” (Mk. 10:45). While Annas lived in luxury in his palace, the Savior was preaching the gospel to the poor. Unlike the wicked priests who had corrupted the doctrine of salvation, the Messiah was light and truth itself. The Old Testament priests had to make offerings over and over again both for themselves and the people. Annas and his comrades had taken advantage of this fact for profit. But Jesus who is holy, harmless and undefiled offered Himself once and for all (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 3:18). While Annas was using the people, instead of interceding on their behalf; Christ lives forever to intercede and care for His people (Heb. 7:25). It is fitting that Annas confronted the Savior, for he represents the old order abused, corrupted and perverted by man. God in His providence allows the Mediator of the new and better covenant to be led as captive into the presence of the leader of an apostate, corrupt, dying priesthood—a priesthood that bowed the knee to Rome instead of the Messiah.

Sixth, the doctrine of Christ may safely appeal to everyone in the world because it is objectively true, totally consistent with reality and perfectly rational. Of all the religions in the world only one has a genuine divine revelation that has never and will never be demonstrated to be false. Yes, it is true that men *claim* they can disprove it, yet their arguments are *always* based on false assumptions and the unsound use of logic. There is nothing secretive or esoteric regarding Christianity. It is a public doctrine that does not need the coercion of the sword as in Islam; a leap into the irrational such as eastern faiths; or, the brainwashing and mind control of the cults. If men do not believe it, it is not the fault of the gospel (which is flawless) but the blindness and partiality of the natural man.

The First Blow

Our Lord’s answer to Annas, with its brilliance, boldness, justice, courage, dignity and directness, was unexpected by those assembled in the high priest’s house. They were expecting Jesus to grovel in the dust before the might assembled against Him. One of the men who worked for Annas (a temple guard) was very displeased with our Lord’s answer and decided to strike Christ on the face. John writes, “And when He had said these things, one of the officers who stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, ‘Do you answer the high priest like that?’ Jesus answered him, ‘If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?’” (Jn. 18:22-23). This wicked underling was no doubt attempting to please Annas who wanted to see the Man that had overturned his money tables humiliated and punished for interfering with his operation. There are a number of things to note regarding this incident.

(1) This blow is an example of the natural man’s enmity toward God and hatred of the gospel. The temple guards had often heard Jesus teach in the temple. They were fully aware of His doctrine. They knew that the man standing before them, with his hands bound behind his back, was innocent. Our Lord’s answer to Annas, although bold and direct, was not insulting. It was calm, well-reasoned and just. The Savior’s answer most certainly did not deserve this cruel and cowardly blow. How can we account for this great injustice? How could a man strike the good Shepherd who was not only innocent but perfectly holy? The Bible tells us that the unregenerate man “hates the light” (Jn. 3:20); “suppresses the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18) and “is enmity against God” (Rom. 8:7). All who preach the gospel to the heathen can expect to be treated with contempt.

(2) This type of blow was considered by the Jews to be especially humiliating. The Greek word used (*rapisma*) in ancient Greek originally meant a “blow with a club (or rod).” Many of the older commentators, following the earliest meaning of this noun, find in this incident a

fulfillment of Micah 5:1, “They shall smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek.” By the time of Jesus, however, it was usually used to describe a hand blow or slap to the face.²⁵

It must have been especially humiliating to Jesus that the first blow came by the hand of a Jew. A Jew who was employed at the temple! Yes, the man whose calling was to protect the temple struck someone “greater than the temple” (Mt. 12:6). Isaiah speaks vividly of this blow and the ones to follow saying, “I gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting” (50:6). “It was unjust to strike one that was confessedly a person of account; it was cowardly to strike one that had his hands tied; and barbarous to strike a prisoner at the bar.”²⁶ J. C. Ryle writes,

We may learn from this circumstance what a low, degraded, and disorderly condition the Jewish courts of Ecclesiastical law must have been in at this period, when such a thing as publicly striking a prisoner could take place, and when violence could be shown to a prisoner in a full court of justice for answering boldly for himself. It supplies strong evidence of the miserably fallen state of the whole Jewish nation, when such an act could be done under the very eyes of a judge. Nothing is a surer index of the real condition of a nation than the conduct of its courts of justice, and its just or unjust treatment of prisoners. The scepter had clearly fallen from Judah, and rottenness was at the core of the nation, when the thing mentioned in this verse could happen. Our Lord’s assailant evidently held that a prisoner must never reply to his judge, however unjust or corrupt the judge might be.²⁷

(3) We see in the conduct of this court that all tyrants rule by force and injustice, and not by truth and equity. When examined by papal bishops, the Protestants of old suffered under the rack, the boot, hot tongs and other tortures almost unthinkable. The saints’ only defense was truth in the heart and God’s Word on the tongue. The people who serve wicked, unjust rulers can only serve them on the basis of injustice and brute force. (The cases of Joseph, Daniel and Mordecai are rare, providential, extraordinary, exceptions to the principle that “corrupt masters have ordinarily corrupt servants”²⁸). “If a ruler pays attention to lies, all his servants become wicked” (Prov. 29:12). “The blow on the cheek, as inflicted for a supposed offense, may be compared with 1 Kings xxvi. 24, where the false prophet Zedekiah smote the true prophet Micaiah.”²⁹

Satan’s kingdom is ruled by oppression, tyranny, terror, torture and murder. As Chairman Mao would often remind his followers, “Power flows from the barrel of a gun.” Throughout history, from Nero, to the papacy of Rome, to the prelatists of Charles II, to modern totalitarian states, we find a common thread of oppression against truth. For example, Lenin’s secret police (the Cheka) followed their corrupt leader by attempting to forge a paradise with barbarity, injustice, torture and death. “In Kharkhov the skin was peeled off victims’ hands to produce

²⁵ “The Greek literally says that the officer ‘gave a *rhapisma* to Jesus.’ The earliest meaning of this noun was ‘a blow with a club (or rod)’. But here it means ‘a slap in the face’” (Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, 94). The Greek scholar, A. T. Robertson, takes a slightly different view: “Late word *rapismo* is from *rapizo*, to smite with a rod or with the palm of the hand (Matt. 26:67). It occurs only three times in the N. T. (Mark 14:65; John 18:22; 19:3), in each of which it is uncertain whether the blow is with a rod or with the palm of the hand (probably this, a most insulting act)” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 5:288). See also Luke 22:63; 2 Corinthians 11:20.

²⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1180.

²⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:266.

²⁸ George Hutcheson, *The Gospel of John*, 382.

²⁹ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:361.

‘gloves’ of human skin; in Voronezh naked prisoners were rolled around in barrels studded with nails, in Poltava priests were impaled; in Odessa captured White officers were tied to planks and fed slowly into furnaces; in Kiev cages of rats were fixed to prisoners’ bodies and heated until the rats gnawed their way in to the victims’ intestines.”³⁰ Most everyone is aware of the fiendish sadism of Stalin, Hitler, Polpot and Saddam Hussein.

The Christian is free from such madness and brutality because the truth doesn’t need the torture chamber. It is unassailable. It stands on its own. The justice and equity of God’s law-Word frees us from the tyranny of human autonomy, of men without God. People bow the knee to Christ out of love and respect not because they are forced to do so by black-booted thugs.

(4) There is an amazing contrast between the brutal behavior of the temple officer and the gentle, reasoned response of the Savior. When a person is struck in a very violent manner for no good reason whatsoever,³¹ the normal, immediate response is to become exceedingly angry. We see this response in Paul who under very similar circumstances replied to the high priest, “God will strike you, you white-washed wall” (Ac. 23:3). But where the greatest of apostles becomes almost unhinged, Christ answers the thug’s attack with a perfect calm. “If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?” (Jn. 18:23). Jesus is saying, “If I have spoken in a wicked, unlawful manner, then act as a proper witness in a court and set forth your evidence; but if I have spoken nothing contrary to the law of God, then on what legal basis do you strike Me?” Interestingly, according to Deuteronomy a man can only be beaten lawfully *after* the determination of the court (i.e. after the judges render their verdict, Dt. 25:1-2). And, the man is only to be beaten after the judge asks him to lie down (Dt. 25:2). This implies that the man is to be beaten only on the back and not on the face. Once again we see the lawlessness of the leaders in Israel.

The response of our Lord to this blow often raises a question as to whether Jesus is obeying His own injunction in Matthew 5:39 to turn the other cheek. The answer to this question is that the turning of the cheek and the holding of the tongue are two differing things. Luther writes,

You are to understand that a great difference exists between these two: holding out the other cheek and rebuking with words the one who strikes us. Christ is to suffer, and yet the word is placed into his mouth that he is to speak and to reprove what is wrong. Therefore I am to distinguish between *the mouth* and *the hand*. The mouth I am not to yield to condone the wrong; but the hand I am to hold still not to avenge myself. We are not only to allow ourselves to be struck on the cheek, but are to allow ourselves to be burned for the sake of the truth. But that I should say to the judge, “Dear judge, you are certainly doing right to burn me,” this would be to betray and to deny Christ as well as that for which I die.... For why should I bid knaves and ruffians do injustice? Why should I say to the thief, “Sir come and steal my coat”? Christ does not ask this, but Christ says, “Whoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other

³⁰ Christopher Andrew and Vasli Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: the Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 29.

³¹ “Old verb *dero*, to flay, to skin, to beat, as in Matt. 21:35; Luke 22:63; II Cor. 11:20, of an insulting blow in the face as here” (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 5:289). R. C. H. Lenski writes, “Jesus uses the strong verb *duein*, ‘to flay,’ indicating the violence of the blow he had received. It produced a contusion of the skin” (*The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 1203). William Hendriksen, citing J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan (p. 142), has a different view. He writes, “The verb which refers to the officer’s base deed probably has the ordinary, colloquial sense: *to beat or to strike* (rather than *to bruise or to flay*)” (*The Gospel of John*, 398).

also.” This means to say, “if one wills to smite thee, do not resist, do not take revenge, do not repay evil with evil.”³²

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³² Martin Luther as quoted in R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1203.