

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

Chapter 8: The Civil Trial of Christ—Jesus before Pilate

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Then led they Jesus from Caiaphas unto the hall of judgment: and it was early; and they themselves went not into the judgment hall, lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the passover. Pilate then went out unto them, and said, "What accusation bring ye against this man?" They answered and said unto him, "If he were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered him up unto thee." Then said Pilate unto them, "Take ye him, and judge him according to your law." The Jews therefore said unto him, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death:" That the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled, which he spake, signifying what death he should die. Then Pilate entered into the judgment hall again, and called Jesus, and said unto him, "Art thou the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered him, "Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Thine own nation and the chief priests have delivered thee unto me: what hast thou done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence." Pilate therefore said unto him, "Art thou a king then?" Jesus answered, "Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." Pilate saith unto him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, "I find in him no fault at all." (John 18:28-38)

And the whole multitude of them arose, and led him unto Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King." And Pilate asked him, saying, "Art thou the King of the Jews?" And he answered him and said, "Thou sayest it." Then said Pilate to the chief priests and to the people, "I find no fault in this man." (Luke 23:1-4)

Introduction

With the ecclesiastical trial of Jesus complete, the Jews turn the Savior over to Pontius Pilate, the prefect or governor over the Jews, "early" (Jn. 18:28) in the morning. (The Jewish trial occurred from approximately 1am to 3am. It was ratified, reconfirmed or made official at sunrise. Since Roman officials conducted their business very early in the day and since the Sanhedrin wanted the Savior killed immediately, they likely arrived at the governor's residence by 7am.) Our Lord is taken to the governor's palace or Praetorium. Scholars are divided regarding where Pilate was staying at this time. Many insist that he was living in the palace of Herod located in the northwest section of the city. "Josephus states explicitly that the procurator, Gessius Florus, lived there and held court on the public square in front of the building (War II.xiv.8, xv.5). That this was true of Pilate as well may be deduced from the information that he had gilded votive tablets bearing Tiberius' name erected in the royal palace (Philo, *Legation to Gaius* 15:16). Mark locates the Roman trial of Jesus in 'the praetorium' (Ch. 15:16), which in

this context can only mean the official residence of the governor.”¹ Others argue that Jesus was taken to the fortress of Antonia because: Pilate did have a residence there to be near the garrison at crucial times (Mk. 15:16); people had to ascend in order to see Pilate (Mk. 15:8); and, the mention of the large stone platform called “the Pavement” (Jn. 19:13). “This Pavement is supposed to have been between the fortress Antonia and the western portico of the temple.”² The Roman historian Suetonius notes that Julius Caesar had “pieces of marble ready fitted that they might be laid down at any place, and the judgment seat be placed upon them.”³ So, the pavement could have been at Herod’s palace. Therefore, the exact place of the trial cannot be proven conclusively. In any case, what is important is what took place at this trial.⁴

Of all the gospel accounts, John contains the most detailed examination of this trial. While all four gospels have Pilate asking Jesus “Are You the King of the Jews?” (Mk. 15:9; Mt. 27:11; Lk. 23:3; Jn. 18:33), John tells us what occurred before this question; that is, the interaction outside the palace between Pilate and the Jewish leaders. (Luke’s account, however, does give us the three specific charges leveled against Christ by the Sanhedrin [Lk. 23:2]). Also, while all the synoptic gospels have our Lord’s affirmative answer to Pilate regarding His kingship, only John has the interaction between Pilate and the Lord after this affirmation where Christ explains the nature of His kingdom and the purpose of His coming. We can be thankful that John was inspired by the Holy Spirit to give us such crucial details regarding the civil trial of our Lord. As we look at this trial, there are a number of important areas to consider.

(1) We need to consider the Roman governor Pontius Pilate and his behavior at the trial of Jesus. Pilate is important not merely for his role in condemning Jesus to death, but also because he ties the gospel of Christ so concretely to history. One of the earliest creeds—the Apostle’s Creed—says, “Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried...”⁵ The gospel involves not only a particular view of a person or a philosophy, but also a belief that certain events actually occurred in history. That Pilate was a real historical figure no one can reasonably doubt. Not only is he mentioned in the New Testament, which is inspired and inerrant (2 Tim. 3:16), he also is discussed in secular histories: Josephus (*Antiqu.* and *War*) and Philo of Alexandria (*Legitio ad Gaium*). Further, in 1961 a stone tablet was discovered at Caesarea, which in Latin bears the names of Pontius Pilate and Tiberius. Regarding Pilate’s career J. G. Vos writes,

Pilate was the fifth Rom. procurator of Judea, appointed c. A.D. 26 by the emperor Tiberius to replace Valerius Gratus. He brought his wife to Judea with him. Pilate’s area of jurisdiction was Samaria, Judea, i.e. the former kingdom of Archelaus, and the area S as far as Gaza and the Dead Sea. His functions combined military and administrative responsibilities. His immediate superior was the Rom. governor of Syria, but the actual nature of the relationship is unknown.

¹ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 548.

² Samuel J. Andrews, *Life of Our Lord upon the Earth*, 530.

³ *Ibid.*, 531.

⁴ Modern pilgrims to Jerusalem who retrace the steps of Jesus from the “Pavement” to what people regard as “Golgotha” begin at the area of the Tower of Antonia, which is the traditional site of the trial and Pilate’s famous words “Behold the man!” There is an arch at this site called the *Ecce Homo Arch*.

⁵ The Apostles’ Creed is an early product of the post-apostolic Western Church. It likely was an early baptismal confession. The earliest written versions are the Latin text from Rufinus (A.D. 390) and the Greek version from Marcellus of Ancyra (A.D. 336-341). “The Greek text is usually regarded as a translation, but is probably older than the Latin, and may date from the second century, when the Greek language prevailed in the Roman congregation” (Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes* [Grand Rapids: Baker, (1931) 1983], 1:19). The received form that most churches use today dates from the seventh or eighth centuries.

Pilate's authority over all persons in his area except Rom. citizens was virtually absolute. On the other hand, the Jews were granted a degree of liberty and self-government. The Sanhedrin at Jerusalem possessed various judicial functions, but death sentences could not be carried out until confirmed by the Rom. procurator. Because of political and religious problems, Judea, from the Rom. point of view, was a difficult province to govern. Pilate outraged the Jews by sending soldiers into Jerusalem with Rom. military standards bearing emblems that the Jews regarded as idolatrous. This had been attempted before, and the Jewish opposition was so strong that the Rom. authorities removed the offensive insignia from standards that were carried into the city of Jerusalem. When Pilate reversed this policy he met with determined Jewish resistance, which he sought to overcome by threatening to kill the objectors. Finding them adamant in their opposition and not afraid to die, Pilate finally had to yield the point. This incident reveals poor judgment, stubbornness, and finally weakness on Pilate's part. Pilate further outraged the Jews by appropriating the *corban* money, or religious contributions from the Temple treasury, to finance the construction of an aqueduct, some twenty-five m. in length, to bring water to Jerusalem from the highlands S of the city. The Jews considered this action sacrilegious and reacted violently. Many rioters were killed by Pilate's soldiers. This may be the atrocity mentioned in Luke 13:1, 2.⁶

Given the rather brutal reputation of Pilate among the Jews and even secular historians, a question that has been raised by various scholars regarding Pilate is: why does he appear so fair-minded regarding Jesus and so determined to let Him go free? Pilate not only is uncooperative with the Jewish leaders who at first expect him to essentially rubber stamp their verdict (Jn. 18:30), but also declares Christ to be innocent of any wrong on three separate occasions (Jn. 18:38; 19:4, 6).

The answer to this question is threefold. First, Pilate may have been impressed by the demeanor of the Savior. The Lord's dignity, courage, confidence and calmness before Pilate were exceptional. Second, Pilate was not ignorant of the corruptions of the Sanhedrin. As a governor in a problematic part of the empire, he had spies and informers and may have known that the case against the Savior was unjust.⁷ Further, his questioning of the Messiah revealed to him that the Nazarene was not a threat to the Roman Empire. Third, an important factor in the midst of the trial was his wife's warning found only in Matthew 27:19: "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him." To a pagan Roman, who was no doubt very superstitious, such a warning would have been frightening. For these reasons, Pilate did virtually everything he could to avoid being the one responsible for the

⁶ J. G. Vos, "Pilate, Pontius" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 4:791.

⁷ Samuel J. Andrews' discussion of Pilate is helpful: "What accusation bring ye against this man? Whether Pilate asked this question from a sense of justice, not thinking it right to condemn any man to death without knowing his offense; or whether he already knew who the prisoner was, and that He had been condemned upon ecclesiastical grounds, we cannot determine. We can scarce doubt, however, that he had some knowledge of Jesus, of his teaching, works, and character. Without troubling himself about ecclesiastical questions, he would closely watch all popular movements; and he could not overlook a man who had excited so much of public attention. If, as is most probable, he was in Jerusalem at the time of the Lord's public entry, he must have heard how He was hailed by the multitude as King of the Jews; and the fact that he placed a part of the Roman cohort at the disposal of the priests when about to arrest Him, shows that they must have communicated to him their design. Some, however, think that Pilate would not have asked them the question about the nature of His offense, if he had the evening before placed his soldiers at their service to aid in the arrest. (See Baumlein on John xviii. 3.) It is possible that this was the act of the commander of the cohort without the knowledge of Pilate. But, however this may have been, it is plain that he was by no means disposed to be a mere tool in the hands of the priests and elders to execute their revengeful plans." (*The Life of Our Lord upon the Earth*, 531-532)

execution of Christ; from his repeated declaration of Jesus' innocence, to his passing the buck to Herod, to his desperate move to have a prisoner released to the Jews. He even chose Barabbas, a wicked criminal, to place next to Jesus, thinking the Jews would let Jesus go.

But, tragically for Pilate, he gave in to the majority of Jews who wanted their Messiah crucified. He handed the Savior over to crucifixion, not knowing that his name would forever be tied to this despicable, cowardly deed. Pilate ultimately was not interested in truth or justice, but rather with pleasing his constituents and his taskmaster, Caesar. This incident is a strong indictment against raw democracy, where the voice of the majority takes precedence over the rule of law. Indeed, Pilate reminds one of modern American politicians who have no Christian religious principles or ethical absolutes whatsoever. For them, the voice of the people is the voice of God. When civil magistrates follow the mob instead of God's law-Word, the state progressively becomes a terror to righteous people. Democracy has always resulted in anarchy followed by totalitarianism; for, given the choice between anarchy and a strong man, people choose the dictator. In a Christian constitutional democracy the law of God is king. In that system there is a genuine rule of law and only Christian citizens who are covenant heads and property owners can vote, serve on juries, hold political office or serve as judges. Under such rule people have great liberty from men like Pilate; for the laws of Scripture protect them from arbitrary, pragmatic leadership whose best intentions usually result in savage oppression.

(2) Let us note the gross religious hypocrisy of our Lord's enemies. John's account says that the members of the Sanhedrin who accompanied the Savior to Pilate's residence "did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover" (18:28). Although no one is sure why the Jews regarded entering a Gentile's house as a cause of uncleanness, scholars believe that the most likely reason was the belief that abortions occurred there and that dead babies were buried under the floors of their houses. Thus to enter such a house would be equivalent to coming in contact with a corpse.⁸ According to Numbers 9:6-12, a person who was defiled by a human corpse "could not keep the Passover on that day" (v. 6). He would have to wait until "the fourteenth day of the second month" (v. 10).

What makes the incident so absurd and ironic is the fact that the chief priests are scrupulous regarding even the slight possibility that a violation of the ceremonial law might occur, even though they have just condemned an innocent, *sinless* Man to death. "[T]hey hold fast to the ceremonial law while they seek the execution of the promised Deliverer of Israel, the Son of God and Savior; and in their zeal to eat the passover lamb they unwittingly help to fulfill its significance through demanding the death of the Lamb of God..."⁹ These wicked reprobates were engaged in the most despicable act in all human history, yet they were concerned about a non-moral offense, a ceremonial regulation regarding defilement. The spiritual blindness and hard-heartedness of the wicked is astounding! Regarding these same men our Lord said, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel...you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Mt. 23:23, 24, 28). "These 'rulers of the Jews' and the multitude that followed them were thoroughly *Ritualists*. It was their ritualism that urged them on to crucify the son of God. Christ and ritualism are opposed to each other as light is to darkness. The true Cross in which Paul gloried and the cross in which modern ceremonialists glory, have no resemblance to

⁸ See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 763; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 327.

⁹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 327-328.

each other. The Cross and the crucifix cannot agree. Either ritualism will banish Christ or Christ will banish ritualism.”¹⁰

The ability of unregenerate professors of religion to deceive themselves regarding the state of their souls is amazing and perplexing. There are adulterers, sex perverts, murderers, homosexuals, criminals, thieves and so on who are scrupulous about taking part in the rituals and external ceremonies of their communions. One can go to church and see sodomites, who the night before were engaged in unspeakable perversions, walking up to the front of the church to take the eucharist. There are members of the mafia who are thieves, extortionists and murderers that have their children baptized, go to communion and even go to confession regularly. During the Crusades, the very same men who prayed to the virgin Mary, worshipped relics, fasted and carried religious banners into battle raped, pillaged and kept prostitutes. What do men do when deep down they know they are not right with God, yet are unwilling to repent of sin and look solely to Christ? They seek refuge in pomp, ritual and the external matters of religion.

Evangelicals are not immune from external ceremonies without true heart religion. They have their own man-made rituals from the altar call (an invention of the Pelagian heretic Charles Grandison Finney) to being slain in the Spirit, to the rote prayer of asking Jesus to live inside one’s heart. They have their laughing revivals, prophecy conferences and such. Yet where is the preaching of the gospel, the concern for sanctification and a thirst for righteousness? Although modern American evangelicalism is not ritualistic in the traditional sense (e.g., Romanism, high church Episcopalianism, Eastern Orthodoxy), nevertheless the gospel and biblical worship have been obscured and superseded by all sorts of gimmicks and church growth techniques. How many evangelicals in America can recite the Ten Commandments? How many churchgoers can define terms such as atonement, propitiation, justification, sanctification and adoption? While many professing Christians today are very concerned about the use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages, they often are not concerned about keeping the Sabbath, having honest business practices, placing their children in satanic state schools and other important matters. “That religion is worth little which does not make us say, ‘I esteem all Thy commandments concerning all things to be right, and I hate every false way.’ (Ps. cxix.128)”¹¹

Today in a number of “reformed” denominations there is a growing movement back toward Rome and medieval high-church liturgical practices. There is the Federal Vision heresy which thinks that matters of daily holiness and separation from the world can be solved by “looking to one’s baptism” and by believing that faith and good works are essentially the same thing. Any religion which takes our eyes off of Jesus Christ and His perfect righteousness to focus our attention on sacraments, ceremonies, robes and vestments, and rote repetitions must be viewed as a close relative to Pharisaical religion and Romanism. “It may be accompanied by immense zeal and show of earnestness, but it is not sound in the sight of God.... That Christianity is worthless which makes us compound for the neglect of heart religion and practical holiness, by an extravagant zeal for man made ceremonies or outward forms.”¹²

(3) The Sanhedrin knew that Pilate would not sentence Jesus to death for the charge of blasphemy so they contrived a plan to convince Pilate that this Man needed to be crucified. This happened in three stages.

First, the Jews came to Pilate “and said to Him, if He were not an evil doer, we would not have delivered Him up to you” (Jn. 18:30). In other words, “This man is a dangerous wicked,

¹⁰ Horatius Bonar as quoted in Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:193.

¹¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:272.

¹² *Ibid*, 3:272-273.

habitual criminal that we have already convicted. Therefore, we have brought Him here for you to punish.” The council, who came out in a large contingent to impress Pilate, was asking him to trust them and rubber stamp their conviction. They did not want Pilate to ask any questions or go into any details because they knew their case was based on lies and distortions. “Look, Pilate, we are the highest court in this nation. Therefore, you should trust our decision and carry out this execution.”

Interestingly, the accusation made by the Sanhedrin to Pilate is quite contrary to what the Savior was convicted with at His ecclesiastical trial. Christ was convicted not for committing any evil acts but for His words—his claim to be the Messiah, the Son of God. But, here, before Pilate, now our Lord is said to be a malefactor, a criminal, a habitual doer of evil.¹³ These wicked liars knew that Pilate would not be concerned about what a man taught, or about fine points of theology. Therefore, they came up with this completely new and false accusation. The sinless Son of God is accused of being a wicked man who not only continuously wallows in sin, but also commits sins that are crimes, crimes even worthy of death. What wickedness!

Pilate’s reply to this request indicates that he was not yet aware of their plan to put Jesus to death. Therefore, Pilate essentially says, “Well, if you think he is a bad criminal then go ahead deal with it according to your law.” His answer indicates that Pilate was not impressed by their accusations and was perhaps even annoyed. It also indicates that he does not trust or respect the Jewish leaders. Pilate is putting the Jewish leaders in their place and demonstrating who has the real authority in Israel. Pilate’s response was not only disappointing, but also humiliating. Pilate essentially said, “Either bring me a formal accusation according to Roman law or get out of my court and stop wasting my time.” Pilate knew that the Sanhedrin was corrupt and he held them in contempt. “He knew that through envy they had brought Jesus unto him, and he loathed the hypocrites as he heard the wretched syllables sibilating from their sanctimonious lips.”¹⁴

As a result of Pilate’s somewhat harsh response, the Jews explain why they have come to him, “Therefore the Jews said to him, ‘It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death’” (Jn. 18:31). Then John adds this inspired commentary: “that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke signifying by what death He would die” (Jn. 18:32). The Sanhedrin by its answer makes it very clear to Pilate that they want nothing less than capital punishment. As students of the law the chief priests knew that death by crucifixion involved a special curse “for he who is hanged is accursed by God” (Dt. 21:23). The Jewish council wanted death by crucifixion as a method of discrediting the Savior before the people. Our Lord, however, had prophesied this event as the manner in which He would take away the sin of the world. “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself” (Jn. 12:32). “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:14-15). Christ’s most explicit prediction of His coming death is found in Matthew 20:18-19: “The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him up to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.” In John 18:32 we see that not one word of Jesus can ever lack fulfillment and also how God uses even the plot of His devilish enemies to carry out His sovereign plan of redemption.

Second, because of Pilate’s uncooperative response the Jewish leaders come up with more formal and detailed accusations. These accusations are recorded in Luke’s gospel. “And

¹³ The Jewish leaders “chose a description which emphasized continuity: *en kakon poion*, ‘habitually doing wrong’” (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 764, footnote 63).

¹⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Our Lord’s First Appearance before Pilate,” 28:88.

they began to accuse Him, saying, ‘We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King’” (23:2). The verb *katagorein*, “‘to accuse,’ is a technical legal term for bringing charges in court against someone.”¹⁵ The term “means *brought charges* as in Acts 22:30; 24:2-21; 25:5-22.”¹⁶ There are three parts to their charges.

a) The first accusation is very general and is likely used to introduce the following more specific charges. They accuse Jesus of “perverting the nation.” Our Lord used this word in Luke 9:41 to describe the moral deviancy of the Jewish nation. In Acts 23:9 and 26:31 the word “pervert” (*diastrephein*) is used to describe men who seduce people away from true Christian doctrine. The same word is used in the LXX (1 Kg. 18:17, 18) when Ahab accused Elijah of being a “perverter” of Israel. That is, Elijah, by his prophecies against Ahab, was destroying people’s respect and dedication to Ahab’s authority. Here the term is used in a political sense. The Sanhedrin is accusing Christ of leading the Jewish nation away from their proper loyalty to the Roman Empire. They are saying that the Nazarene is a political subversive, a revolutionary, an agitator, a major troublemaker for Rome. The next two charges are meant to exemplify how the accused is causing trouble.

b) Our Lord is accused with “forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar.”¹⁷ This accusation is particularly dishonest in that earlier the same enemies of Jesus had sent spies to test the Savior asking, “Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (Lk. 20:22). These men knew that their charge was utterly false for our Lord had said, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Lk. 20:25). These men knew that Christ had preached peace and not sedition. They knew that He lived a life of humble submission and not rebellion. The Savior was a meek and lowly servant of the people and not a rabble-rousing revolutionary leader. The chief priests’ hatred of the Messiah was so strong that suddenly they became great patriots of heathen, idolatrous Rome. They wanted the Son of David executed for supposedly expressing some anti-Roman sentiments. Pilate knew something was wrong—that these men were filthy liars.

c) The main and most serious charge was that Jesus said that “He Himself is Christ a King” (Lk. 22:2). “This charge, if proved, would have exposed him to inevitable death, for never

¹⁵ John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 1117.

¹⁶ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, 574.

¹⁷ Knowing their own recent history, the Jews believed that the tax issue would be a sore spot with the Roman authorities. Klaas Schilder writes, “At the time when Jesus was still a lad, at about the time when He was first allowed to accompany His parents in their pilgrimages to the temple, a great tumult had arisen among the Jews. It had been caused by the appearance of a certain ‘Judas the Galilean, the son of Ezechias.’ This Judas, of whom we read also in Acts 5:37, had become the leader of a rebellion caused by a refusal to pay taxes at the time when Quirinius had taken over the registration in the province of Galilee in the interest of the Roman government. This Judas of Galilee had put himself at the head of those rebelling against taxation, had recruited a large company in the neighborhood of Sephoris in Galilee, had armed his followers with munitions taken from the royal arsenal, and had, in short, put the whole of Galilee into a state of tumult. It was said, in fact, that he had wanted to be made king. In this revolution a well-known Pharisee whose name was Sadduk had been his accomplice. By an appeal to the religion of the forefathers and to Israel’s immemorial messianic expectations, these two had preached the revolution. True, their ‘success’ had been a meager one. The movement was soon smothered in blood. Nevertheless, their brief effort had left a deep impression upon the people. Hence it was no wonder that Roman authority, after those turbulent days, had kept an even sharper eye open for every religiously motivated agitation which in its effect might prove to be a threat to the government. Indeed, there was good reason for caution in this matter. The rebellion of the Galilean Judas had even served as an impetus to the formation of a new party, a group which aligned itself with the Pharisees—the so-called party of *Zealots*. These were committed to a program of abandoning the current *laissez-faire* policy in favor of active rebellion against the despised Roman authority” (*Christ on Trial*, 323-324).

were prosecutions for treason more severe than under the reign of Tiberius. A charge of high treason, says Tacitus, was, at that time, an accumulation of all (possible) charges.”¹⁸ The Jews in this accusation are falsely imputing to the Savior their own political and military expectations of the Messiah. Thus, on the one hand their accusation is true: Jesus is the anointed One—the King of Israel. But, on the other hand, the accusation is totally false in the Jewish political-military sense.

Even in this charge the Sanhedrin is lying, for they know that Christ never taught or claimed a kingship in the carnal, earthly sense. After the Savior fed the multitude, “when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone” (Jn. 6:15). In Luke’s gospel when a man from the crowd asked the Lord to make a ruling on his behalf regarding his brother’s inheritance money Christ said to him, “Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?” (12:14). When the chief priests, temple guards and Roman soldiers came to arrest Jesus, He did the exact opposite of what an earthly king or revolutionary would do. He demanded that Peter put his sword into its sheath (Jn. 18:11; Mt. 26:52) and even healed the ear that Peter had wounded (Lk. 22:51). If Christ had been a carnal, earthly king as the Jews were asserting, then why did He command His servants to never resist or interfere with the reigning powers? Why did He order His disciples to carry the Roman soldiers’ gear two miles when they were only compelled to go one mile (Mt. 5:41)? Why is there not one example in any of the gospels (with the one exception of Peter who our Lord rebuked) or the whole New Testament of the Savior’s followers taking up arms against the state? Yes, Jesus was a King. But He never claimed the type of kingdom or worldly dominion that the Jews were attributing to Him. For over three years throughout the nation of Israel, Christ had preached peace, humility, love and a leadership of humble service. His kingdom was not based on military power, revolution or political confrontation, but on the righteousness of God and the peace of salvation. The truth is that “nothing tends more to make men good subjects than making them Christ’s faithful followers.”¹⁹ The Sanhedrin knew that our Lord was not a political or military rival to Caesar. But they knowingly lied because of their envy and hatred of Him.

The Examination

After the Jewish leaders present their case to the governor, Pilate, because of the serious nature of the charges, must examine Jesus. Therefore, leaving the members of the Sanhedrin behind, he goes into his palace to interrogate Christ. “The trial of Jesus before the governor thus is played out like a drama on two stages, front and back,”²⁰ with Pilate going back and forth between our Lord and His enemies. What this means is that the Sanhedrin does not hear what the Savior says to Pilate. The profound revelations regarding His kingdom and mission are only spoken to the Roman governor.

When Pilate examines Christ he completely ignores the first two accusations and focuses on the most serious charge: the kingship of Jesus. The governor’s first question to the Savior—“Are You the King of the Jews?”—is recorded in all four gospels (Mk. 15:2; Mt. 27:11; Lk. 23:3; Jn. 18:33). Pilate uses “the emphatic personal pronoun *su* as had Caiaphas in 14:61: ‘Are *you* the Messiah...?’ The emphatic pronoun carries with it a touch of mockery, perhaps

¹⁸ Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary of the Gospel According to Luke*, 650.

¹⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:821.

²⁰ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 328.

suggesting that Pilate had anticipated meeting someone more impressive (i.e. ‘You? You must be kidding!’).”²¹ The Savior standing before Pilate in bonds, with His face swollen and bleeding from the beating He received, with His clothes stained with blood, sweat and the spit from His enemies did not look at all like a king to Pilate. How could Pilate (a powerful Roman magistrate with soldiers under his charge, his luxurious palace, his magnificent clothing and his wealth) believe that the poor, beaten, bound and humiliated man before him is a king? To Pilate such a scenario was utterly absurd.

Further, why would the Jewish people bring their own king before the Roman prefect to be executed? Pilate knew that the Jews hated their subjugation under Rome; they would never treat their leader in such a rough manner. If this Nazarene was a revolutionary leader who was a serious threat to Rome, then he must be regarded as a colossal failure for where were His followers and defenders? Why are the leaders of the people seeking His death? How could a man who was bound, beaten and delivered up by His own people be the one who would cause these very same people to rebel against Rome? The governor knew that nothing in this scenario made any sense whatsoever. But, in order to protect himself from the Jews and his superiors, Pilate had to continue the trial.

The three synoptic gospels ignore the interaction between our Lord and Pilate immediately after this question and go directly to the main point of Jesus’ answer: “It is as you say” (Mt. 27:11; Mk. 15:2; Lk. 23:3). Christ’s answer, “You say [so]” (*su legeis*), is an indirect affirmation. Our Lord is not being evasive with this answer; rather he is implying that Pilate does understand the kind of king that He is. To paraphrase, “That is what you are saying, however I have not been advertising this truth.” “Jesus does not deny the identification, for he is indeed the ‘King of the Jews,’ but it is not his preferred self-designation.”²²

The gospel of John, which presupposes our knowledge of the synoptic gospels, gives us Christ’s full reply. There are three aspects to our Lord’s response.

First, the Savior wants to know if the question originated from Pilate’s own concerns, or if he was being influenced by others. “Jesus answered him, ‘Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?’” (Jn. 18:34). “Jesus wants to know whether Pilate has any insight of his own which he can lead on to further understanding”²³ or if he merely received the complaints of the Jewish leaders which are distorted and prejudicial. Christ’s response to Pilate’s query was not an attempt to avoid the truth, but was a means to clarify the situation and appeal to Pilate’s conscience. “It was designed to excite within him distrust of the Jews’ accusations.”²⁴ If Jesus had been a king in the sense that the Jews presented to Pilate, then why does Pilate, a prefect with informers, soldiers and spies, need to be informed about it by the Jews? Obviously, if our Lord was an insurrectionist Pilate would have already known about it independently of the Sanhedrin. “Hast thou, during all the years thou hast been a Governor, ever heard of Me as a leader of insurrection, or a rebel against the Romans? If thou has never heard anything of this kind against Me, and hast no personal knowledge of my being a rebel, oughtest thou not to pay very little attention to the complaint of my enemies?”²⁵

Pilate, who is not used to being questioned by prisoners, who is arrogant and who holds the Jews in contempt answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have

²¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 818.

²² *Ibid.*, 819.

²³ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 339.

²⁴ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:376.

²⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:286.

delivered You to me. What have You done?” (Jn. 18:35). Pilate admits that he knows nothing about seditious acts or words on the part of Jesus. The governor by his answer is saying, “Look I am not a Jew. I should not be expected to understand the religious and sectarian controversies of Your nation.” Pilate’s question, “What have You done?” has the sense of “What actions have you taken that have provoked this fierce hatred and hostility toward You?” The governor does not believe that our Lord is really a king or political revolutionary. However, he wants to know what lies behind the accusations. Pilate wants to drag this out into the open in order to see whether this prisoner has really done anything against Rome or not. There is a sense of annoyance and perhaps frustration in Pilate’s reply. The whole situation bothers him. He smells a rat and is no mood to play games with the chief priests.

Second, when Pilate asks “What have You done?” our Lord ignores this question and instead defines the nature of His kingdom. “Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here’” (Jn. 18:36). Here Christ gets right to the heart of the matter. He openly admits that He is a king. He says “My kingdom.” But, although He admits that He is indeed a King, He goes on to explain that it is a type of kingdom that does not threaten Caesar or Pilate with an insurrection or violent overthrow.

Our Lord defends Himself by telling Pilate what His kingdom is not. “My kingdom is not of this world... My kingdom is not from here.” “The literal rendering of the Greek would be ‘out of this world.’ But it evidently means ‘belonging to, dependent on, springing from, connected with.’”²⁶ In other words, My kingdom’s *origin* or *source* is found in heaven not on earth. My authority, rule or kingship does not derive from anything on earth such as popular uprisings, money, weapons, political movements, guerilla warfare, state sponsored warfare, terrorism, popularity, etc, but from God Himself. “His kingdom is not by succession, election, or conquest, but by the immediate and special designation of the divine will and counsel.”²⁷ Christ is a king and does have a kingdom, but it is a spiritual kingdom that originates from heaven, a kingdom of grace.

Jesus’ statement to Pilate was not a new doctrine. During His ministry when the Pharisees asked Him “when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, ‘the kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, “See here!” or “See there!” For indeed the kingdom of God is within you’” (Lk. 17:21-22).²⁸ The kingdom does not come with observation like the marching of armies or bold military victories. It rather is a redemptive-spiritual kingdom entered only by being born again. “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5). Jesus told His disciples that His kingdom was not spread by military might, but rather through service to Christ

²⁶ Ibid, 3:287.

²⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1185.

²⁸ Some commentators favor translating *entos hymon* as “in your midst,” indicating that the kingdom is present among the Pharisees with Jesus and the disciples. This view is supported by a number of arguments. (1) It is said that ancient papyri permit such a translation. (2) Nowhere in the New Testament is the kingdom regarded as something internal. (3) It could not be said to the Christ-hating Pharisees that the kingdom was “within” them. (4) Jesus often speaks of men entering the kingdom, but never of the kingdom entering men. In opposition to this translation those who favor “within you” offer the following arguments. (1) The context strongly favors “within you” for Jesus had just said the kingdom was not an outward visible entity. (2) The “you” is indefinite, thus it does not apply to the unbelieving Pharisees. (3) The New Testament (Mt. 23:36, “the inside of the cup,” the LXX (e.g., Isa. 16:11) and inter-testamental literature (e.g., 1 Mac. 4:48) all support the translation “within you.” (4) Saying “the kingdom is within you” is not at all inconsistent with New Testament teaching that Christ’s kingdom is spiritual. (5) One could add that the translation “within you” was universally accepted by the Latin church fathers.

and one's neighbor. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Mt. 5:5). Further, as already noted, our Lord emphatically rejected the Jewish crowd's attempt to make Him an earthly political king; and always refused the attempts of the Jews to get Him involved in a conflict with the Roman authorities (e.g., Mt. 22:21; Mk. 12:17; Lk. 20:25; Jn. 8:3ff.).

Our Lord's concept of the kingdom as spiritual is assumed by and taught throughout the New Testament. For example, Paul said that "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). When the apostle exhorts strong believers to exercise restraint for the benefit of weaker brethren, he appeals to the nature of the kingdom. "So far from Christ coming to regulate men's diet, he came to establish *righteousness* in every sense of that term, *and peace* in all the fullness of its blessings, *and joy in the Holy Ghost*. The kingdom of Christ is spiritual, not carnal."²⁹ Hodge writes, "The righteousness, peace and joy intended are those of which the Holy Spirit is the author. Righteousness is that which enables us to stand before God, because it satisfies the demands of the law. It is the righteousness of faith, both objective and subjective; peace is the concord between God and the soul, between reason and conscience, between the heart and our fellow men. And the joy is the joy of salvation; that joy which only those who are in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost ever can experience."³⁰

Jesus knew that his answer was totally foreign to Pilate so He explains what He means. He says that if His kingdom were of this world, then He would have an army like other earthly kings and this army would defend His life with brute physical force. Since the Savior's kingdom "did not spring from the same source as the kingdoms of the world, neither is it supported, maintained, or increased by the same power as that which the kingdoms of the world depend upon. Christ's kingdom does not depend upon the force of arms: he would have his followers lay these weapons all aside. Christ's kingdom does not depend, as earthly kingdoms too often do, upon craft, policy, and duplicity."³¹ "He tells him that He did not come to set up a kingdom which would interfere with the Roman government. He did not aim at establishing a temporal power, to be supported by armies and maintained by taxes. The only dominion He exercised was over men's hearts, and the only weapons that His subjects employed were spiritual weapons."³² "Pilate must therefore recognize that his rule is wholly different from that of the political powers of this world, and wholly different from anything that Pilate experienced; hence he constitutes no threat to Roman authority."³³

Before we examine the positive aspect of our Lord's confession (Jn. 18:37), we need to clear up a common misconception regarding the Savior's statement that His is a kingdom not of this world. This statement is often taken to mean that civil magistrates should have nothing to do with religion; that Jesus only rules in our hearts and only concerns Himself with what occurs in His church; that the state is to be purely secular in the New Covenant era and must not promote one religion over another. In other words, people think Christ is teaching that His kingdom is *irrelevant* to the world, is not *active* in this world, *has nothing to do with this world* and will *never change this world*. This kind of teaching is very common among premillennialists, both ancient and modern, especially dispensational premillennialists. Although our Lord is reassuring Pilate that He is not a physical threat to the Roman Empire, He is not saying that His kingdom

²⁹ William S. Plummer, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, [1870] 1971), 614.

³⁰ Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1835] 1972), 425.

³¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, "Our Lord's First Appearance before Pilate," 28:92.

³² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:273.

³³ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 331.

will not powerfully affect this world. There are a number of reasons why we must reject the retreatist interpretation of this passage.

a) “First, observe that He did not say ‘My kingdom is not *in* this world,’ but ‘My kingdom is not *of* this world.’ Believers are not ‘of this world’ (17:6), yet they are in it.”³⁴ “He is speaking of the *source* of His authority, not the place of His legitimate reign. His kingdom is not *of* this world but it *is* in this world and over it.”³⁵ The fact that Christ’s kingship and authority is from heaven and not earth means that he has an even greater authority over this planet than do political rulers. Although earthly rulers have a genuine authority, their authority is not absolute for they receive their authority from God. Paul even says they are ministers of God (Rom. 13:4). But Jesus, who received a comprehensive, universal authority over everything in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18), sits on God’s throne itself. He is the “King over kings and Lord over lords” (Rev. 19:16). He judges the rulers of the earth (Ps. 2:12) and all political rulers have a moral obligation to serve Him with fear and trembling (Ps. 2:11). It is simply bad exegesis and logic to argue that since Jesus does not resort to earthly methods (guns, bullets, bombs, political revolution, warfare, etc) because His kingdom is spiritual, that His authority is restricted to the prayer closet or church building. Hengstenberg writes, “The word of Jesus, ‘My kingdom is not of this world,’ has often been perverted in the interests of a theory which would sunder the state from the dominion of Christ. Rightly understood, the passage subserves the very opposite purpose. The kingdom that sprang directly from heaven must have absolute authority over all the earth, and it will not submit to be put into obscurity or into a corner. The necessary consequence of the saying, ‘not of this world, not from here,’ is what we find written in Rev. xi. 15: ‘The kingdoms of the world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Anointed; and He shall reign for ever.’”³⁶

b) Our Lord’s parables teach that the kingdom would be very small at first in its effect on earth, but over time it would progressively come to dominate this world prior to the second coming. Jesus compared the kingdom to a miniscule mustard seed which grows into a tree (Mt. 13:31-32). There will be an immense development of the kingdom until it embraces all peoples, tribes and tongues. In the parable of the leaven, the gospel kingdom spreads until the whole world is leavened (Mt. 13:33). “This implies that the Christian must live in the world, for the leaven cannot work without contact. Human life must be touched at all points, in order that its work and its play, its religion and its relaxation, its politics and its commerce, its science and its arts, may be raised and warmed by the penetrating action”³⁷ of Christ’s glorious gospel and its sanctifying effect upon man, institutions and cultures.

Many premillennialists have the idea that if Jesus is not physically present, ruling from Jerusalem with military and police powers, then the kingdom is not actualized on earth. But, this view fails to recognize that the spiritual nature of our Lord’s kingdom is what makes it so strong and permanent. Men are changed not by force or by the barrel of a gun, but by the Holy Spirit from the inside out. A kingdom where people obey out of true love and devotion can never fail. Spurgeon’s comments on this topic are excellent:

³⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:199.

³⁵ Gary North, *Backward Christian Soldiers* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984), 4.

³⁶ E. G. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:378.

³⁷ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1915] 1982), 194-195.

Spiritual or not, the kingdom of Christ on earth is real and powerful. It is real none the less, but all the more, because it may fitly be called spiritual. Jesus is even now a king. He said, "I am a king." Some say that his kingdom is not yet, but is reserved for the latter days; but I aver that he is a king to-day, and that even now Jehovah hath set him as king upon the holy hill of Zion. I bless God that he hath translated us "Into the kingdom of his dear Son." "Thou art the king of glory, O Christ." When I say, "Thy kingdom come," I do not mean that it may begin to be set up on earth, but that it may continue to be set up on in new places, may be extended and grow, for Jesus has at this very moment a kingdom upon the face of the earth, and they that know the truth belong to it, and recognize him as the royal witness by whom the kingdom of truth has been founded and maintained. You remember the remarkable saying which is attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte in his later days at St. Helena: "I have founded a kingdom by force, and it has passed away; but Jesus founded his empire upon love, and therefore it will last for ever." Verily, Napoleon spoke the truth—Jesus, the right royal Jesus, is Master of innumerable hearts to-day. The world knoweth him not, but yet he has a kingdom in it which shall ere long break in pieces all other kingdoms. True and loyal hearts are to be found among the sons of men, and in them his name still wakes enthusiasm, so that for him they are prepared to live and die. Our Lord is every inch a king, he has his throne of grace, has his scepter of truth, his officers who, like himself, witness to the truth, and his armies of warriors who wrestle not with flesh and blood, and use no carnal weapons, but yet go forth conquering and to conquer. Our Lord has his palace wherein he dwells, his chariot in which he rides, his revenues, though they be not treasures of gold and silver, and his proclamations, which are law in his church. His reigning power affects the destiny of the world at this present moment far more than the counsels of the five great powers: by the preaching of his truth his servants shape the ages, and set up and cast down the thrones of earth. There is no prince so powerful as Jesus, and no empire so mighty as the kingdom of heaven.³⁸

c) That the kingdom of heaven is to have a strong impact upon this earth prior to the second coming is proven from Daniel 2:44-45:

And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever. Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure.

The vast majority of interpreters identify the four kingdoms of Daniel as (1) the head of gold—the neo-Babylonian empire; (2) the breast and arms of silver—the Medo-Persian empire; (3) the belly and thighs of bronze—the Grecian empire; and (4) the legs and feet of iron and clay—the Roman Empire. Daniel says that the statue which represents these successive pagan empires is still standing when the kingdom of Christ is set up. In Daniel 2:31-45 the Messiah's kingdom is described as coming and smiting the fourth world kingdom, crushing it in pieces. Then this stone became a great mountain and filled the whole earth (Dan. 2:35). This amazing prophecy means that the kingdom of heaven or our Lord's spiritual kingdom, which was established during the Roman Empire (the fourth kingdom), will progressively have victory over the kingdoms of this world. Therefore, even though Jesus' kingdom is not dependent on carnal weapons and does not foment rebellion against the state, it still has the power to sanctify and

³⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, "Our Lord's First Appearance before Pilate," 28:92.

radically change existing institutions and even nations. It does not accomplish this task with swords of steel, but the two-edged sword of the Spirit.

Premillennial dispensationalists who believe that the kingdom is wholly future have come up with a clever method of reinterpreting this passage to fit into their eschatological paradigm. They argue that the toes of this image represent a revived Roman Empire in the future. They apply the phrase “in the day of these kings” to a future ten nation European (or for some, Middle Eastern) confederacy and not to the statue organically considered which the context demands.³⁹ The dispensational view must be rejected as being exegetically untenable for “[i]t makes too much of the symbolism. We are not expressly told that there are ten toes. The *ten* kings can be derived only from the ten horns of Dan. 7:24-27. That there are ten toes is merely inferred from the fact that the colossus appears in the form of a man. Furthermore, *the image was not smitten upon the toes but upon the feet* (2:34). Now the feet and legs are to be taken together (2:33)... Lastly, the phrase *in the days of these kings* cannot refer to the ten toes (Gaebelein), for the toes are nowhere identified as kings. Nor does it refer to the kings of the fourth monarchy, for no such kings are mentioned; the only kings or kingdoms mentioned are the four empires.”⁴⁰

d) The fact that the kingdom of God originates in heaven and is not spread by the use of the sword does not mean that government officials cannot rule using Christian principles or God’s law. To argue that kings, presidents and judges cannot use the Bible as a basis of law and justice would not only condemn all nations to the fate of positivistic law, relativistic ethics, atheism, statism and injustice; but, would also explicitly contradict many passages of Scripture. “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov. 14:34). What is sin? “Sin is the transgression of the law” (1 Jn. 3:4; cf. Rom. 4:15). “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD” (Ps. 33:12). “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God” (Ps. 9:17). While the Savior’s kingdom and the visible church can function quite well in a heathen nation that has no regard for Christ, the Bible plainly teaches that when civil magistrates have no regard for God’s Son they are in deep trouble. “Every Government is responsible to God, and no Government can expect to prosper without God’s blessing. Every Government is bound to do all that lies in its power to obtain God’s favour and blessing. The Government that does not strive to promote true religion, has no right to expect God’s blessing.”⁴¹

The Bible even predicts a time when the nations of this earth will trust in the Son of God, obey His law and worship Him. “All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the LORD’s, and He rules over the nations” (Ps. 22:27-28). “Oh, let the nations be glad and sing for joy! For You [the Lord Jesus Christ] shall judge the people righteously, and govern the nations on earth” (Ps. 67:4). “Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations will serve Him... All nations shall call Him blessed” (Ps. 72:11, 17). “All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O LORD, and shall glorify Your name” (Ps. 86:9). “Praise the LORD, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples! For His merciful kindness is great toward us, and the truth of the LORD endures forever” (Ps. 117:1-2).

³⁹ “The image represents four successive pagan empires. They are viewed organically because each incorporated the preceding empire. The statue is one. The kings obviously represent the four kingdoms represented by the statue. This should be obvious when we keep in mind that the recipient of the vision (Nebuchadnezzar) is the first king. “The kingdom of Messiah... was set up 1900 years ago in the days of the Caesars by Jesus and His apostles, and has been growing and spreading ever since.” (Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* [Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974], 123).

⁴⁰ Edward J. Young, *Daniel* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1949), 78.

⁴¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:288.

While believers can never use the sword or coercion to make converts either as private citizens or even as civil magistrates; nevertheless they can promote the true religion by spreading the knowledge of Christ and supporting Bible-believing Reformed churches with their tithes. Isaiah prophesied that the nations would learn God's law and gospel from the visible church. "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:2-3). He even prophesied that kings and queens or civil magistrates in the New Covenant era would support the church of Christ. "Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers; they shall bow down to you with their faces to the earth, and lick up the dust of your feet" (Isa. 49:23). "Every good Government should endeavor to promote truth, charity, temperance, honesty, diligence, industry, chastity among its subjects. True religion is the only root from which these things can grow. The Government that does not labour to promote true religion cannot be called either wise or good."⁴²

Much of the confusion regarding the relationship between Christ's kingdom, which is spiritual, and the civil magistrate, who does not hold an ecclesiastical office or perform ecclesiastical functions, is a failure to understand that while both church and state are separate and distinct spheres of authority both are still directly responsible to Jesus Christ. The church's sphere of authority is spiritual. It is responsible to preach the gospel, preserve true doctrine and discipline unrepentant church members. This can include admonition, rebuke, exclusion from the Lord's table and even excommunication if necessary. The church, however, does not have authority to arrest criminals, execute murderers or force thieves to make restitution through physical coercion. The civil sphere, or the state, is under the authority of the resurrected Redeemer and must exercise its authority as a "minister of God" (Rom. 13:4) to punish crimes (biblically defined) by the "sword" or the use of physical coercion. It is not to interfere with the ecclesiastical sphere unless ministers or elders are guilty of committing a civil crime such as fraud, adultery or murder. The church is not to interfere with the civil sphere by using physical force or carnal weapons. However, it can and should use spiritual discipline and even excommunication if necessary for civil magistrates that are guilty of scandalous sin or of promoting serious sins through public policy (e.g., promoting abortion, sodomite rights, legalization of gambling and prostitution, etc). The church fights against evil with spiritual weapons. It preaches the truth to civil authorities and can even publicly rebuke civil magistrates who are guilty of public offenses.

There is nothing in Scripture which teaches that the state cannot serve Christ. However, it serves the Savior in a different way than the church. It does so by implementing civil laws that are based on biblical principles; by having policies that support the true Christian religion and suppress false religions and dangerous heresies; and, by publicly recognizing Jesus Christ as Lord through covenanting and establishing biblical Christianity as the official recognized religion of the nation. While on the one hand, a Christian state must not use the sword or coercion as a method to gain converts; yet on the other hand, it must not pretend to be indifferent or neutral regarding Jesus Christ. Those who argue that all established churches are unlawful, that magistrates must be pluralistic and neutral regarding religion are setting forth the completely absurd notion that a state can only be faithful to Scripture by publicly denying the resurrected

⁴² Ibid.

King. “It is undoubtedly true that Christ’s kingdom is a kingdom independent of the rulers of this world, and one which they can neither begin, increase, nor overthrow. But it is utterly false that the rulers of this world have nothing to do with Christ’s kingdom, may safely leave religion entirely alone, and may govern their subjects as if they were beasts and had no souls at all.”⁴³ As Hutcheson observes, “This [passage] is not to be understood as if Christ disallowed that they to whom he hath given the sword should defend his kingdom therewith; for if magistrates even as magistrates, should be nursing parents to the church, and ought to kiss the Son, as the Scriptures do record, then certainly they may and should employ their power as magistrates for removing of idolatry and setting up the true worship of God, and for the defending thereof against violence.”⁴⁴

Therefore, while individual believers must never draw the sword in defense of Christianity and church officers are not to advocate the use of guns, bullets and bombs to defend the name of Christ, civil magistrates can use their God-given authority to pass just laws that honor the Savior by punishing wicked criminals and by protecting the church against *public teachers* of apostasy, damnable heresy and blasphemy. The idea that Jesus forbids all civil governments from having anything to do with Christianity is unscriptural, “baseless, preposterous and utterly devoid of common sense.”⁴⁵

Christ’s Positive Confession

As our Lord defends Himself against the false charges of the Jews, He not only tells Pilate what His kingdom is not, but also describes what His kingdom is. John 18:37-38 reads, “Pilate therefore said unto him, ‘Art thou a king then?’ Jesus answered, ‘Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.’ Pilate saith unto him, ‘What is truth?’”

When Jesus told Pilate “My kingdom is not of this world” and went on to explain that His servants would not fight on His behalf, Pilate was somewhat confused. He had never heard of a kingdom like this. Therefore, he needs some clarification and returns to his original question. But instead of saying, “Are You the king of the Jews?” he simply says, “Are You a king then?” The question shows that the governor has largely understood what the Savior has said and is satisfied that the Jewish charge of a political or military kingship is false, for he doesn’t say king of the Jews but only king. “So you are a king, then, aren’t you?”

After our Lord acknowledges that He is a king by affirming the rightness of Pilate’s perception (“Thou sayest...”) Jesus informs the governor of the purpose of His coming into the world. Christ’s amazing statement contains three elements.

(1) The Savior uses a double expression to refer to His birth and incarnation; that is, His coming from the presence of God into this world. “For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world” (Jn. 18:37). This Hebraistic parallel manner of speech was an implicit acknowledgment to Pilate that He had come down from heaven to fulfill His mission on earth. The statement, “To this end I was born,” refers to the fact that he was born as a man for a specific God-given task. As the author of Hebrews says, “Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come—In the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God’” (Heb. 10:7). The other

⁴³ Ibid., 3:288-289.

⁴⁴ George Hutcheson, *The Gospel of John*, 388.

⁴⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:288.

words, “For this cause came I into the world,” “show that the being of Christ in time and upon earth was preceded by another being [i.e. eternal preexistence].”⁴⁶ “The governor might not have understood all the meaning that Jesus could put into expression. But at least it would impress him with the fact that Jesus was an unusual person, and that He was speaking of an unusual coming to this world. It is difficult to see how the implication is to be avoided that Jesus is claiming pre-existence.”⁴⁷ “From the ivory palaces of heaven he had descended into this sin-cursed world in order there to take upon himself his mediatorial task, his saving ministry.”⁴⁸

(2) Our Lord tells Pilate that He came into the world to bear witness to the truth. Jesus is saying that, unlike other kingdoms that rule by brute force and coercion, He rules by means of truth in the broadest biblical sense of the term, especially the truth of the gospel. It is through the preaching of the gospel that men become subjects of the King. It is only through divine revelation that men can understand the sum of saving knowledge and the requirements of the Savior. As the author of Hebrews says, “God who at various times and in various ways spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom He also made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”(1:1-4). Jesus rules not only because he is divine and has died on the cross as the once for all sacrifice for sin, but also because He brings the finality and completeness of the Word of God. The revelation of God in Christ the Son is perfect, sufficient, complete and final. It is the scepter by which the Messiah rules. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). “The true doctrine about man, and God, and salvation, and sin, and holiness, was almost buried, lost, and gone, when Christ came into the world. To revive the dying light, and erect a new standard of godliness in a corrupt world, which neither Egypt, Assyria, Greece nor Rome could prevent rotting and decaying, was one grand end of Christ’s mission. He did not come to gather armies, build cities, amass treasure, and found a dynasty, as Pilate perhaps fancied. He came to be God’s witness, and to lift up God’s truth in the midst of a dark world.”⁴⁹

The great power of the Word of God to rule over men’s hearts and consciences is seen in the book of Revelation which speaks of the warrior Prince who asserts His authority, judgment and rule by means of the truth. “Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called the Word of God, and the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with the rod of iron” (19:11-15). “Christ rides forth to victory in His character as ‘the faithful and true *Witness*’ (3:14) as ‘the Word of God’ (19:13). St. John is not describing the Second Coming at the end of the world. He is describing the progress

⁴⁶ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:381.

⁴⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 771.

⁴⁸ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 409-410.

⁴⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:290-291.

of the Gospel throughout the world, the universal proclamation of the message of salvation, which follows the First Advent of Christ.”⁵⁰

Jesus says that the power and authority of His kingdom is found in the truth. He conquers the world by the sword that proceeds out of His mouth: the infallible Scriptures. How then do we serve as soldiers in the Master’s army? We must believe the truth, live the truth and teach the truth. If we do not believe the truth—that Jesus died for our sins according to Scripture and rose victorious over sin, Satan and death, then obviously we cannot serve the resurrected King. If we do not repent of our sins and live the truth, then we have no reason to believe that our faith is genuine and our relatives, friends and acquaintances have no reason to believe what we say about the gospel.

Our Lord’s teaching should be a warning to every professing Christian not to get side-tracked with movements, causes, political maneuvering, protesting and such that are not thoroughly rooted in the true gospel. Believers who think that they can change society by picketing an abortion clinic or supporting a conservative pagan running for office are deceiving themselves. These things may temporarily help society as a holding action against the degradation of culture. But, without people being changed by the Holy Spirit’s application of the truth to the heart, the change is only outward and temporary.

Jesus’ doctrine regarding the truth ought to be the main concern of everyone. Ask yourself some crucial questions: Have I demonstrated that I belong to the Master’s kingdom by my dedication to the truth? Do I regularly study God’s Word to become acquainted with the truth? Or, am I spending my time in pursuit of pleasures and vanities? Do I think that theology is important? Do I study the best Reformed works on doctrine in order to master the truth? Do I studiously meditate on God’s law so that I can avoid living a lie? “Do I desire to get rid of everything in myself that is not true? Am I anxious to put down around me everything that is false and wicked?... Do I desire to spread the principles of love and kindness, for they are truth? Am I willing to learn, and so become the disciple of the greatest of all teachers, and then, am I willing to bear witness to what I have learned, and so spread the sway of truth? If so, then I am of his kingdom.”⁵¹

The reason that Christian churches have so little influence in our culture and society today is the simple fact that they have abandoned the truth in many areas (doctrine, worship, church government, ethics, science, etc) in favor of pragmatism and human wisdom. Tragically, the relativism of modern culture (which says there is no absolute truth, there are no ethical absolutes) has influenced many professing Christians to the point where the knowledge of the truth is rejected in favor of having an experience and where even biblical dogmatism is condemned because precision in the truth divides professing Christians. If we are to be effective in advancing the cause of Christ, then we must stoutly maintain the truth in all circumstances. Truth and biblical dogmatism are necessary for all soldiers in the Savior’s kingdom.

As we see how evil the world is around us and see the persecution of Christians in many countries, we must not forget that the power of God’s truth is truly remarkable. When our Lord was crucified and all the disciples were scattered, would anyone in their right mind believe that, within three hundred years, Rome would become a professing Christian state? Would anyone think that the heathen savages of northern Europe (who practiced witchcraft, sorcery and human sacrifice) would be converted and become architects of a Christian civilization? Those poor

⁵⁰ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 481-482.

⁵¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Our Lord’s First Appearance before Pilate,” 28:93.

preachers who carried the gospel throughout the world were the instruments in God's hand that changed wicked barbarians into saints. When the truth of the gospel was overshadowed by a corrupt and apostate church God, raised up the Reformers to point men back to Jesus Christ, to *sola Scriptura* and to the truth of the gospel. The Reformation churches responded to the darkness of Romanism with the truth. They formulated creeds, confessions and theological treatises to indoctrinate people in the truth and combat error. They gladly debated priests and papal theologians at the risk of their own lives because of a love of the truth. The answer to error, lies and heresy was to strengthen one's knowledge of true doctrine, to sharpen it, publish it and proclaim it.

The more modern churches adopt the pragmatism, existentialism and relativism of secular humanism, the more churchmen see themselves as the source of wisdom. Although many churches formally adhere to biblical inerrancy and *sola Scriptura*, they deny it by their actions. The *summum bonum* of many modern evangelical churches is church growth rather than upholding the truth regarding doctrine, worship and ethics. When foolish pastors and church boards see themselves as the source of truth instead of Scripture alone, they have doomed our culture to a new dark age.

(3) Our Lord makes an indirect appeal to Pilate's conscience. He says, "Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" (Jn. 18:38). Those who are of the truth are those who possess the truth and obey it. As John said in his first epistle, "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth, and by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him" (3:18-19). The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd (Jn. 10:18) and follow Him (Jn. 10:27). If a person believes in Christ, he is of the truth. Christ told the Jewish leaders, "He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God (Jn. 8:47). John writes, "We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us" (1 Jn. 4:6). Those who are of the truth will hear what the Savior says; receive it as true; and, obey it because it is true. Jesus is telling Pilate that His disciples love the truth, have a desire to know the truth and do everything they can to live the truth.

The Master's statement to Pilate is remarkable. Most people in this world are after wealth, fame, power, leisure, and the like. But our Lord's disciples are after truth. That is their obsession. This inward heart craving for the truth is not something men are naturally born with, but rather is a result of the Holy Spirit opening blind eyes, unstopping deaf ears and changing hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. "All that by the grace of God are rescued from under the power of *the father of lies*, and are disposed to receive the truth and submit to the power and influence of it, will hear Christ's voice, will become his subjects, and will bear faith and true allegiance to him.... All that are in love with truth will hear the voice of Christ, for greater, better, surer, sweeter truths can nowhere be found than are found in Christ."⁵²

Are you of the truth? Do you love the truth or do you hate it because it exposes who you really are? Do you look to Christ as God, as the source of all truth? Or do you delight in the lies of this world because you are unwilling to repent of your sins and embrace the Savior? Before you stands truth or falsehood, light and darkness, Christ and this evil world; if you are of the truth then you will embrace Jesus by faith; if not, your lies will follow you into the pit of hell.

Our Lord is, by implication, saying to Pilate, "Are you of the truth; are you willing to listen?" Tenney notes that "Jesus was more interested in appealing to Pilate than defending Himself. This method appears in all of his other interviews in this Gospel. In each of them Jesus'

⁵² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1186.

focus was on reaching the heart of the person he addressed, not simply in magnifying himself. He made an appeal to Pilate, not for acquittal or mercy, but for recognition of truth.”⁵³

If Pilate had been a seeker after the truth, then this would have been the perfect opportunity to find the truth and grasp it by faith. But Pilate did not have ears to hear the truth. Pilate was a man of the world. He was steeped in Greek and Roman skepticism; he knew all about the irrationality and mysticism involved with the gods of Greece and Rome. Therefore, he made the fatal mistake of treating Jesus like just another philosopher, sage or mystic. While he did not believe that Christ was a political revolutionary or any threat to Rome, he also did not accept the Savior’s amazing claims regarding preexistence and truth. He had the Truth standing right there in front of him who spoke words from heaven, yet he asked “What is truth?”

In this answer we see a man who in many ways sounds very modern. In our day of pluralism and relativism where all viewpoints are said to be true and every religion must be given respect in the civil and public square, what one believes becomes unimportant and irrelevant. Religions and philosophies are like foods or clothing styles that can be sampled and discarded when one pleases. The problem with the modern world spirit of pluralism and relativism is that if all religions and worldviews are equally true, then they also are equally false. The modern position really makes autonomous man god, for man is said to determine truth by personal preference. Like Pilate, many men dismiss Christ and the gospel as impractical and a waste of time. Like Pilate, they are unwilling to look to the Savior so they sneer and walk away.

A certain amount of skepticism is understandable given the thousands of false and bizarre cults, religions and philosophies in this world. Most religions are easily disproved as fraudulent and contradictory. This fact, however, does not mean that Jesus Christ can be dismissed. Our Lord not only proved His kingship and deity by perfectly fulfilling prophecy; working hundreds of public miracles; making His own amazing predictions that were perfectly fulfilled (e.g., His betrayal, crucifixion and resurrection, the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, etc); and rising from the dead; but also set forth truth that cannot be refuted. In fact, the Christian worldview is the only religion that can account for reality. Do not be like Pilate who asked an important question in a skeptical, cold manner and then walked away without even waiting for an answer. If you turn your back on Christ, then only nihilism and despair await you. They certainly were for Pilate. As Hengstenberg writes, “These three words ‘What is truth?’ were for Pilate full of destiny. By them he put away truth from himself which so graciously and invitingly appealed to him. By them he laid the foundation for the suicide by which, according to the report of Eusebius, who appeals to Greek historians, he ended his days under the Emperor Caius.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Merrill C. Tenney, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 176.

⁵⁴ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:383. Klaas Schilder believes that Pilate’s question is an insult to Christ. “We hear him asking: ‘What is truth?’ Such a statement is an instance of negation. In making it, Pilate is placing Christ outside of the sphere of those who are to be taken seriously. Obviously if truth cannot be known anyhow, if the true knowledge of God is unattainable, then its chief ‘Prophet’ is both the most amusing and the most piteous idler attending the world’s vanity fair. That is negation. But from negation Pilate and those with him pass on to defiance. The end of the matter is that the question, What is truth? Inspires the other inquiry, What is justice? It is after Pilate has asked that second question that he gives Jesus up to death. Everyone knows what happened after that: Insult, a defiance of Christ upon the mountain of all kings. What follows is a mock-drama performed in disdain of a presumptuous king: a purple robe, a crown of thorns, a sponge of vinegar supported by a reed and manipulated by sneering soldiers” (*Christ on Trial*, 340).

The Verdict

After conversing with our Lord, Pilate went out of the palace taking the Savior with him and returned to the paved courtyard where the Jewish leaders were waiting. Here the governor finds Jesus innocent of all the charges. “I find no fault in Him at all” (Jn. 18:38).⁵⁵ Pilate knew that Christ had committed no crime, that He had done nothing wrong and was willing to say so publicly. “It was only fitting that he who was one of the chief agents in killing Him, should publicly declare that like a lamb without blemish, there was ‘no fault in Him.’”⁵⁶ Everyone who has ever closely examined the Savior has had to admit that He was not guilty of any sin. In all of human history, Jesus’ perfect character stands alone.

The sinless perfection of Christ is important for two reasons. First, He had to be the sinless lamb of God in order to die for our sins. Jesus, the sinless One, died in our place, to remove the guilt and penalty of our sins. Second, His perfect character means that we can place all of our trust in Him. He is trustworthy and will never let us down. While in life we see the sins and defects in our friends and are often disappointed, we can rest assured that Christ will never disappoint us. Spurgeon notes this important truth:

Do you not think that out of the millions of Christians who have lived hoping in Christ some one would have told us if it is his habit to disappoint his people? Out of so many believers who dwell with Him surely some one or other of them, when they came to die, would have told us if He is not all that He professes to be. Would not some one or other have confessed, “I trusted in Christ and he has not delivered me; it is all a delusion”? Surely, out of the many we have seen depart we should have found some one or two that would have let out the secret, and have said, “He is a deceiver, he cannot save, he cannot help, he cannot deliver.” But never one dying believer throughout the ages has spoken ill of him, but all have said, “We find no fault in him.”⁵⁷

Having declared Jesus innocent of all charges, Pilate should have released Christ at this time. But Pilate, being a typical politician, placed truth and justice behind his desire to please Caesar and to avoid problems with the Jews. In Luke’s account (23:4) we find that the chief priests were accompanied by a large crowd of supporters who likely were gathered by the enemies of our Lord to put pressure on Pilate to convict the Savior. With Pilate’s declaration of innocence the Jews became even more determined against the Messiah. Here the synoptic gospels give us some details that John omits:

And when he was accused of the chief priests and elders, he answered nothing. Then said Pilate unto him, Hearst thou not how many things they witness against thee? And he answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly. (Mt. 27:12-14)

⁵⁵ “The Greek *aition*, the neuter of the adjective *aitios*, meaning ‘responsible, guilty’—here used as a substantive. We find the same word in verse 22, where it is translated ‘cause’ (with the additional phrase, ‘of death’). Arndt and Gingrich helpfully translate the whole expression in verse 22: ‘reason for capital punishment’ (p. 26). Pilate, as governor conducting a Roman trial, was not saying that he found no ‘fault’ in Jesus’ character. He was affirming that he found no crime worthy of punishment” (Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, 78).

⁵⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:293.

⁵⁷ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Our Lord’s First Appearance before Pilate,” 28:94.

And the chief priests accused him of many things: but he answered nothing. And Pilate asked him again, saying, Answerest thou nothing? behold how many things they witness against thee. But Jesus yet answered nothing; so that Pilate marvelled. (Mk. 15:3-5)

And they were the more fierce, saying, He stirreth up the people, teaching throughout all Jewry, beginning from Galilee to this place. (Lk. 23:5)

The Jews were not expecting such a serious setback in their goal to have Jesus crucified. Thus, they responded by becoming “more fierce.” The Greek word, *epischyon*, translated as “were the more fierce” (KJV, NKJV), “more urgent” (RSV), or “kept on insisting” (NASB), means literally “to grow stronger.” The Jews became even more determined and insistent in their accusations against the Messiah as if raw determination alone could force Pilate’s hand, even in the face of truth and justice. With this fierce, obstinate attitude, the Jews once again accused Christ of many things (Mk. 15:3; Mt. 27:13). They even reported the same charge of stirring up the people, but now threw in the added detail that the trouble began in Galilee (Lk. 23:5). Galilee at that time was a hotbed of political subversion against Rome.

Pilate’s “announcement was received with a shriek of disappointed rage and the loud reiteration of the charges against Him. It was a thoroughly Jewish spectacle. Many a time had this fanatical mob overcome the wishes and decisions of their foreign masters by the sheer force of clamor and pertinacity [i.e. unyielding, obstinate, perversely persistent].”⁵⁸ The Jews hated their Messiah so much they raged against Him like a pack of wild dogs—“They were more clamorous and noisy; they cried out louder and exerted themselves with great fury and violence.”⁵⁹

In the reaction of the Jews to Pilate’s declaration of the innocence of Christ we see a sharp contrast between Jesus and His kingdom and the world and all the enemies of true religion. While the Savior ruled by truth and opposed His enemies with infallible Words from heaven and good works, the enemies of our Lord can only attack Him by lying about His character and seeking His death.

Two of Satan’s favorite weapons against God’s people throughout history have been false witnesses or slander and physical coercion or violence. We see this in how Christ rebuked His enemies: “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it” (Jn. 8:44). Throughout our Lord’s ministry the Jews sought to kill Him and they did everything they could to destroy His reputation. They sent their wicked underlings to spread the lies that He was “a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Lk. 7:34). Our Lord was accused of being a bastard (Jn. 8:48) and a demon possessed Samaritan (Jn. 8:48) who cast out demons by the power of Satan (Mk. 3:22).

In the apostolic era the Jews accused Paul of being a “plague” (Ac. 24:5) and attempted to have him killed for sedition against Rome (Ac. 17:5-8). In the post-apostolic era pagan Romans often accused Christians of killing and eating babies, drinking blood and having orgies. In the sixteenth century Roman Catholics accused Protestants of being gross, sensuous libertines who had no regard for holiness whatsoever. The tactic of Satan and his minions has not changed throughout all of church history. We must not be surprised if we are slandered by the unbelievers

⁵⁸ James Stalker, *Life of Christ* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1880), 134.

⁵⁹ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:716.

around us. If we are faithful to God's Word we must expect to be mistreated and maligned by the secular media, by the pagan civil magistrates, and by antinomian and heretical professors of religion. Also, if the world speaks well of us, then we need to carefully examine our lives to see if we are compromised in doctrine or ethics.

We must look to Christ as He endured the many false accusations against Him. We must follow our Lord's example and be prepared for the attacks when they do come. If our Savior, who was ethically perfect, was attacked with such ferocity, then we who are far from perfect will not be able to escape the lies and slander that come from the devil's followers. "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household?" (Mt. 10:25). "Nothing is too bad to be reported against a saint. Perfect innocence is no fence against enormous lying, calumny, and misrepresentation. The most blameless character will not secure us against false tongues. We must bear the trial patiently. It is part of the cross of Christ. We must sit still, lean back on God's promises, and believe that in the long run truth will prevail."⁶⁰ (See Mt. 10:26; Ps. 37:6-7)

The Lord's Silence

Both Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus answered these accusations with nothing, not even one word. This silence astonished Pilate. "It was as if the surging of the wild waves broke far beneath against the base of the rock, which, untouched, reared its head far aloft to the heavens. But as He stood in the calm silence of Majesty, Pilate greatly wondered."⁶¹ By His silence our Lord was once again fulfilling prophecy (Isa. 53:7, "He opened not his mouth") and also was placing Himself in a position where crucifixion was virtually inevitable, for Roman law at that time convicted men who refused to defend themselves.⁶² Pilate was greatly amazed by Christ's silence and even encouraged the Savior to speak: "Answerest thou nothing? Behold how many things they witness against thee" (Mt. 27:4). Pilate, who had no malice against the Savior, urges Jesus to defend Himself because he wanted Christ to clear Himself. Although the governor may have thought our Lord was a misguided religious idealist, he knew that he was harmless as a dove and did not want to put Him to death.

Pilate's great astonishment at the silence of Jesus is understandable given the following considerations. First, the governor had been through many trials and was used to defendants giving a very animated, vocal self-defense. Jesus may have been the first defendant to remain perfectly silent before His accusers. Second, Pilate had just talked with Christ and knew by our Lord's own words that He was innocent. Why then would He remain silent before His enemies?

⁶⁰ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 449.

⁶¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 2:571-572.

⁶² A. N. Sherwin-White writes, "The story of the reluctance, or at least the surprise, of Pilate, however much it may have been worked up for the propaganda purposes of the authors, is not without Julio-Claudian analogies. The Roman criminal courts were more familiar with the absentee accuser than with the defendant who would not defend himself. A series of ordinances beginning with a well-known decree of the Senate inspired by the emperor Claudius sought to protect defendants against defaulting accusers who left their victims, as Claudius complained, *pendentes in albo*, swinging idle on the court lists. But a better comparison comes from the procedure in the early martyr trials, first testified, but not first employed, seventy years later. Those who did not defend themselves were given three opportunities of changing their minds before sentence was finally given against them. This was an early technique already established as the regular thing before Pliny's investigations in c. A.D. 110, his letter about the Christians being the earliest evidence for it" (*Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, (1963) 1978], 25-26).

Third, this was a death penalty case. Was not this Nazarene afraid of death, the excruciating death of the cross? People in our Lord's position at this point would be greatly afraid. They would be begging and pleading for their lives. But here stands Jesus without fear or agitation of any kind. "It was not the silence of defeat or confusion but of a triumphant resolution."⁶³ Pilate must be thinking, "What kind of man is this who without fear would go willingly to the cross?" Fourth, the chief priests were accusing the Savior of being a dangerous, troublesome, aggressive revolutionary, yet here stands a peaceful, silent, dignified, calm Man, gentle like a lamb before Pilate. Why would such a holy, guiltless, noble Man refuse to refute His wicked, dishonest accusers?

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[HOME PAGE](#)

⁶³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-18*, 819.