

Why our Lord was Crucified

At the time of Jesus the Sadducees controlled the priesthood and the temple worship, but they were the liberals. They did not believe in the resurrection or a life to come. Caiaphas and his sons were Sadducees. Jesus silenced the Sadducees over the question of the resurrection (Mt 22:23-33). The Pharisees were conservative in their attitude to Scripture, but they were proud of their righteous lives under the Law and the tradition of the elders, and very judgmental of those who did not come up to their ideals, though in fact they often applied lower standards to themselves than to others. There was a difference between the Pharisees' inward piety and outward piety. Though the Sadducees and Pharisees had a kind of uneasy truce, they were able to act together when they felt threatened. For example, both groups came together to test Jesus when they asked Him for a miraculous sign from heaven (Mt 16:1).

Jesus insisted that people's righteousness had to be better than that of the scribes and Pharisees. He preached inward as well as outward righteousness. He said that outwardly sinful people like tax collectors and prostitutes were nearer the kingdom of God than people who made their own religiosity a barrier between themselves and God. Jesus' alleged breaking of the Sabbath alienated both groups from Him. Jesus won no friends among the Pharisees when He called them "whitened sepulchres." Many Pharisees would have denied that they were deliberate hypocrites.

People can usually tolerate opponents who espouse various causes, but become alarmed when their opponents get followers. After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the Jewish religious and political establishment saw Jesus as a threat to their own positions of authority. The Sadducees and the Pharisees consulted together about how to deal with Jesus. Caiaphas did what Or Samuel Johnson described as the last refuge of scoundrels. He appealed to patriotism. On his advice, in order to "save" the nation, the Jewish Council resolved to put Jesus to death (Joh 12:46-53). The Evangelist John points out that Caiaphas, as the official high priest, made an unwitting prophecy, that it was better for the one Man, Jesus, to die than for the whole nation to perish. The Jewish leaders even contemplated putting Lazarus to death.

The Jewish leaders were glad when Judas offered to betray Jesus to them. Their jealousy of Jesus did not deter them from trying to get false witnesses to testify against Jesus. When that failed, the chief priest, who ought to have been the impartial judge controlling the investigation, took over the role of prosecutor. He said to Jesus, "I put you under oath by the living God: Tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God!" Jesus, in effect said that, though they were judging Him, He would one day be judging them, They would see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven. Then they condemned Him to death for blasphemy. They were so convinced that His claim to be God's promised Messiah was false that they considered it unnecessary to evaluate His claim any further. They wanted Him crucified. God's Law had said that anyone who was hanged on a tree was under God's curse, and that suited them fine. That would really discredit Him!

So was blasphemy the ultimate reason for Jesus' condemnation? The Council quickly changed their charge of blasphemy against Him into three political charges when they took Jesus to Pilate. Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent, and wanted to set Him free, but he was weak, and tried three ways to get out of making a tough decision. He opted for what seemed expedient. One of the three was the choice between Jesus and Barabbas. Pilate wanted the Jews to solve his problem for him by choosing the innocent Jesus over a convicted rebel and assassin. Barabbas may have been a member of the political group, the Zealots, who wanted to throw the Romans out of Palestine by violent means and establish an independent state of Judea. ,

So why did the Jews want Jesus crucified? Was it really blasphemy? Pilate knew that they had handed Him over to him out of jealousy. Their request to have Barabbas, an opponent of Rome, released, plainly contradicted their professed loyalty to the Roman emperor.

Why did the political and religious establishment want Jesus dead? Their charge of blasphemy was a subterfuge, a means of condemning Him that would look right under God's Law, which said that a blasphemer should be put to death. When the earlier meeting of the Jewish council took place after Lazarus had been raised, there had been no mention of blasphemy. They were concerned that Jesus exposed both their groups for what they were. Had He not warned people to beware of the doctrines of both the Sadducees and the Pharisees? He was a threat to their positions of authority. They attributed to Him what He had never tried to get, earthly dominion at their own expense.

Church history has provided similar examples. Athanasius had probably been guilty of some high handed actions against a Christian group in Egypt called the Meletians. He may even have threatened to use his popular

position in Egypt to call a strike to block the corn supply from Egypt to Rome. However, he knew and loved the truth of Jesus' divinity. He refused to bow to pressure from the Emperor to restore communion with Arius, and went into exile five times because of his struggle for the truth of Jesus' full deity with the Father.

Savonarola, a monk at Florence in the late fifteenth century, denounced the sins of the people of Florence and the pope, and preached salvation in Jesus Christ by the grace of God. Because the pope feared an attack on his crown, he placed Florence under an interdict. Subsequently the people of Florence put Savonarola to death, partly at least incensed by the papal interdict. The pope's desire to protect his position was a large part of the reason for the death of this earnest preacher.

Jan Hus, a Czech priest, attacked the ecclesiastical establishment for simony and the sale of indulgences. Although the Emperor Sigismund had given Hus a safe conduct to Constance, the Council of Constance branded Hus a heretic, and it was argued that a safe conduct did not apply to a heretic, and Hus was burnt at the stake. What was important to Sigismund and the ecclesiastical establishment? Certainly not their consciences! It was their unity, not the truth, or love.

Martin Luther preached salvation by the grace of God through faith in Christ, and the period between his nailing up the 95 theses at the end of October, 1517 and Pope Leo X's excommunication of him in 1520, as a wild boar that had entered the vineyard, was short. That excommunication was a study in hypocrisy and misuse of Scripture. Had it not been for the protection of Elector Frederick of Saxony, Luther's prince, and the greater protection of God, Luther would have come to a similar end to that of Jesus, Savonarola, and Hus.

The Reformation broke the old solidarity between the state and the Roman Church. Although there were still martyrs, chiefly the Anabaptists in Calvinist or Reformed lands, persecution as a consequence of opposition to the ecclesiastical establishment was subtler. For example, Paul Gerhardt, a Lutheran pastor and writer of hymns in Prussia, which was under the control of Calvinist rulers, chose exile rather than compromise with his ruler's insistence on unionism with the Reformed. Although the mode of persecution had changed, there was nothing new when someone went against the entrenched ecclesiastical establishment.

The beginnings of Lutheranism in Australia were due to the determination of Pastors Kavel and Fritsche to choose migration to an unknown country with a language foreign to them on the other side of the world rather than submit to the unionistic decrees of the Prussian King Frederick William III. Pastor Grabau, who was an early leader of the Saxons who went to Perry County, Missouri, about the same time, had also made a similar choice rather than submit to pressure from the same establishment. Those who subscribe to *Christian News* will be aware that similar pressure has been applied by church authorities to its editor, Herman Otten for about forty years now, for exposing liberalism at Concordia Seminary, St Louis. Currently Or Steicke is saying that three things are necessary for the LCA in its discussion about women pastors, truth, love, and unity. Earlier, when some of us had a conscience about the reading of lessons in church by women, the impulse for what was wanted led to a short-changing of truth, and unity, and love. In spite of the high sounding things that are being said, it is going to be interesting to see the devices that are used by the establishment to get what it wants.