

IS HE THE CHRIST?

John 7:25-36

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“Some of the people of Jerusalem therefore said, “Is not this the man whom they seek to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ?” (Jn. 7:25-26).

The summer of 1776 was a time of heightened tension for the thirteen American colonies. In the previous year, the battles of Lexington and Concord started open warfare with England and Patrick Henry boasted “Give me liberty or give me death!” But by 1776, it was clear that liberty would be hard-won, and there was an open question as to the colonies’ resolve. So all eyes were on the meeting of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, which on July 4 answered the questions with their Declaration of Independence.

There must have been a similar tension in Jerusalem in the fall of Jesus’ last year. It is clear that Jesus’ miraculous exploits were widely known, along his claim to be Israel’s long-awaited Messiah. Just as the hot summer months of 1776 decided the fate of colonial America, the six months between the Feast of Booths and Jesus’ final Passover sealed the fate of Israel. So important were these months for all the world that history itself lay balanced on a knife edge.

America’s question in 1776 was one of national importance. But the question concerning Jesus was of cosmic importance: “Can it be... that this is the Christ?” (Jn. 7:26).

WHY CAN’T JESUS BE SILENCED?

At the time, however, most of the conversation in Jerusalem did not center on Jesus himself, but rather on what we might call the

politics of the situation. They asked: “Is not this the man whom they seek to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ?” (Jn. 7:25-26). The crowd’s example is followed by people today who are concerned more with the ideas of opinion leaders rather than with facing the facts about Jesus for themselves.

But the question itself is not a bad one, since its answer tells us important truths about Jesus. The crowd was aware of the leaders’ plot to take Jesus’ life, so they wondered why were they letting Jesus preach. But, looking from the outside, we might direct this question to Jesus himself: Why can’t Jesus be silenced?

The crowd assumed that Jesus remained free because the leaders were uncertain about him. That was, however, an inaccurate suggestion. Back in John 5 when Jesus taught about his deity, we learned that this motivated the leaders all the more to kill him (Jn. 5:18). Now, in John 7, when the Pharisees detected signs of belief in Jesus, they got together with the chief priests and sent the temple officers to arrest him (Jn. 7:32). So the reason Jesus remained free was not that the worldly powers were reluctant to do him violence. The true reason was that they were not able to silence Jesus Christ.

The history of the Church reveals a similar situation. The world does not lack resolve to hinder or harm Christians. In the days of the early church, Christians were arrested and killed in Jerusalem. Shortly after the gospel spread to Rome, Christianity was made illegal there. The emperors savagely persecuted Christians from the time of Nero – who reputedly executed the apostles Peter and Paul – until the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in 312 A.D. It was made a crime to own a Bible, and a concerted attempt was made to eradicate the Scriptures. And it did not stop with the ancient age. Especially in the modern era, Christians have been consistently harassed, opposed, and persecuted. Yet nothing stops Jesus or silences his gospel! Jesus promised that “the gates of hell will not prevail” against his church (Mt. 16:18). And so it has been.

A famous example comes from the French Revolution, which deified atheistic reason, removing the altar from Notre Dame and planting the “Tree of Reason” in its place. Voltaire wrote that in fifty years no one would remember Christianity. “In twenty years,” he said,

“Christianity will be no more. My single hand shall destroy the edifice it took twelve apostles to rear.” But twenty years passed and Christianity remained. Voltaire, however, died, and in death even he remembered Christianity. The doctor who attended him recorded his last words: “I am abandoned by God and man!... I shall go to hell; and you will go with me. O Christ! O Jesus Christ!” Fifty years came after Voltaire’s boast, and the house from which he assaulted God’s Word was by then the headquarters of the Geneva Bible Society, from which Christians were mass-producing Bibles.¹

Why couldn’t Jesus be silenced at the Feast of Booths? John tells us, “They were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come” (Jn. 7:30). God planned for Jesus to die as the Savior for sinners, but the time for that death had not yet come. It would happen in the way and at the time God intended. A. W. Pink comments, “They could no more arrest Christ than they could stop the sun from shining... Until God’s foreordained hour struck, and the incarnate Son bowed to His Father’s good pleasure, He was immortal.”²

This should encourage Christians, because what was true for Christ is true for us. J. C. Ryle rightly notes that Christians “live in a world where God overrules all times and events, and where nothing can happen but by God’s permission... They may boldly say to every cross, ‘Thou couldst have no power against me, except it were given thee from above.’”³ Like Jesus, every believer can say, “I trust in you, O LORD... My times are in your hand” (Ps. 31:14-15).

The same is true for the gospel. The Jews wondered how Jesus could teach so openly, and the world has often marveled at the gospel’s liberty throughout history. John Calvin said, “When the ungodly do not hinder the progress of the Gospel as they would wish, we ought to be sure that their efforts are ineffective because God has set His hand against them.”⁴

Jesus cannot be silenced, but he can be ignored. He can be ignored by proud unbelievers who close their ears to the world’s only gospel.

¹ Cited from James M. Boice, *Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), I:101.

² Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 393-394.

³ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:32.

⁴ John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 4:190.

Jesus teaching can be largely ignored by believers, who fail to apply Jesus' teaching to their lives – in their habits, their homes, and their relationships – and thus fail to receive blessings that would have been theirs. Since God has so carefully kept Jesus from being silenced, let us make sure that we listen and learn from Jesus.

WHY DOESN'T JESUS FIT OUR IDEAS?

Few, if any, of Jesus' hearers understood this. Indeed, how little they understood is seen in their own answer to their first question.

Some had wondered if the authorities might think Jesus was really the Christ. Immediately, they came up with reasons to dismiss such a possibility. The first had to do with Jesus' origins: "But we know where this man comes from, and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from" (Jn. 7:27).

This was one of the false ideas about the Messiah that was current in Jesus' time. The tradition had arisen that the Christ "was waiting concealed and some day would burst suddenly upon the world and no one would know where he had come from."⁵ This was a rabbinic teaching, an example of which appears in Justin Martyr's 2nd century book *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*. Trypho argued that Jesus could not be Messiah because the Messiah "is unknown, and does not even know Himself, and has no power until [Elijah] come to anoint Him, and make Him manifest to all."⁶ Starting with this idea, the crowd in Jerusalem concluded that since they knew where Jesus came from he could not be the Messiah.

This is what Jesus proceeded to do. "So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, 'You know me, and you know where I come from? But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know'" (Jn. 7:28). This was a rebuke. The people had no idea of Jesus' true origins, and this revealed their general ignorance about God. They might have some knowledge of his human upbringing, but of Jesus' true origin they had no knowledge. In fact, the very matter they gave as a reason to reject Jesus – his origin – is one of the greatest reasons to trust him. Leon

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I:243.

⁶ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, in *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), I:199.

Morris writes: “If they had really known where Jesus came from, they would have known that he was indeed the Messiah. But all that they knew was that he came from Nazareth, an unimportant village in Galilee. They were quite ignorant of the virgin birth, of the truth that Jesus was ‘from above,’ and that he was where he was because the heavenly Father had sent him.”⁷

As he often did, Jesus made other important points in his answer. “He who sent me is true,” Jesus said (Jn. 7:28). This contrasts with their falsehood, and with mankind’s general lack of knowledge about heavenly things. They needed to get their ideas about the Messiah from God’s Word – not from worldly traditions. Had they consulted the prophets, they would have found ample evidence to prove that Jesus is the promised Savior. The same is true for us.

Secondly, Jesus seems to contrast himself with the religious leaders, whose opinion the crowd so valued. “I have not come of my own accord,” he said (Jn. 7:28). The Pharisees and scribes were motivated by their own visions of success and salvation, and they stepped forward on their own initiative. Unlike them, Jesus came on a divine mission, having been sent not on his own impulse but by God. The same should be true for every servant of Christ today: we do not call ourselves to ministry but respond to the call of God.

Thirdly, Jesus seems to have been offended by their misrepresentation of God’s plan. Perhaps you have had the experience of knowing someone well and then hearing other people completely misrepresent his or her actions. It bothers you, because you know the truth. Likewise, Jesus said of God, “I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me” (Jn. 7:29). Instead of spouting their false opinions about God, people need to listen to the One, Jesus, who really knows the Father and his plans. Indeed, this statement sums up a great portion of John’s theology of Jesus Christ: “I know him,” “I come from him,” and “he sent me.” These are great truths proclaimed in this Gospel which call on us to put our trust in Jesus Christ.

The crowd withheld their belief because Jesus did not fit their ideas. The reason he did not was that theirs was a false criterion. The same

⁷ Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 269.

happens today: people deny Jesus because he does not fit the erroneous ideas that arise from their ignorance of God and his ways.

WHY DOESN'T JESUS FIT OUR EXPECTATIONS?

I began by observing that this conversation took place in a most tense environment. This was not a cozy dialogue but a dire confrontation. Jesus was aware that the on-looking Pharisees were plotting murder, and he knew the consequences of their plans. So he continued: “I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come” (Jn. 7:33-34).

These words were rejected for yet another unbelieving reason. First, Jesus did not fit their ideas about the Messiah’s origin; now Jesus was not fitting their expectations for the Messiah. “The Jews said to one another, ‘Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, ‘You will seek me and you will not find me,’ and ‘Where I am you cannot come?’” (Jn. 7:35-36).

Jesus was talking about his ascension into heaven, following his crucifixion and resurrection, after which Jerusalem’s opportunity to believe would have passed. But his hearers thought Jesus was proposing to leave Palestine for the detested Gentile regions, where many Jews still lived. This may reveal some irony from the apostle John, who wrote this Gospel from his church in the Gentile city of Ephesus. If the crowd thought it preposterous for Jesus to take the gospel to the Gentiles, how amazed they would have been to see the mighty spread of Jesus’ teaching throughout the world by his apostles and by later generations of his disciples!

But Jesus’ purpose was to point out the brevity of their opportunity to believe on him. “I will be with you a little longer,” he said (Jn. 7:33). Jerusalem rejected Jesus largely because of their spiritual pride. They expected the Messiah to come praising them, and vindicating their privileged place as God’s people. But Jesus came first to die for their sins – and this they would not accept. We know that their unbelief grieved Jesus deeply. At his very last visit to the temple, just days before his death, Jesus lamented: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How

often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! See, your house is left to you desolate” (Mt. 23:37-38).

People continue to miss salvation for similar reasons. Mankind is self-centered, and wants a Messiah who comes for its own sake. But notice how Jesus defines his ministry. His primary focus is on what he has come to do for God. Yes, his work benefits men and women – if they will humble themselves as sinners and believe on his cross. But what Jesus did was mainly for his heavenly Father. He says he came from God and he goes back to God. How God-directed Jesus was in all things; we should have the same orientation in all that we do.

People are still being led away from Christ because of false expectations. Some think the gospel should have a certain political agenda – either liberal or conservative – so they are dismayed when Jesus does not implement their platform. Many are led from Christ because of materialistic expectations – like those falsely touted by the so-called health-and-wealth gospel. If they are sick or fail to become rich, they are embittered against Jesus. Some Christians expect that Jesus will keep them from troubles in marriage or at work, or they are resentful because of problems with their children. But Christians should not expect a carefree life. Jesus never promised an easy life, but frankly taught, “In this world you will have tribulation” (Jn. 16:33).

WHAT MORE COULD JESUS HAVE DONE?

Does that give us little reason to believe on Jesus? Or does it suggest that we might somewhere find a better Savior? Not at all! Indeed, there were some in the crowd whose thinking was at least in the right direction. John tells us, “Many of the people believed in him. They said, ‘When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?’” (Jn. 7:31).

The “signs” refer to Jesus’ miracles. This crowd would have been aware of miracles that Jesus had performed during his first visit two years earlier (Jn. 2:23). They also knew about his healing of the paralytic, which brought accusations of Jesus breaking the Sabbath, and they must have heard about his miracles in Galilee. With this in

mind, these believers asked the reasonable question, “What more can one do to prove himself as the Messiah than what Jesus has done?”

If these people had reason to believe that Jesus is the Savior, how much more reason do we have. In addition to the miracles Jesus performed then, we have the testimony of his work in history.

James Boice lists three reasons why we should agree that Jesus has amply proven himself to be the Savior sent from God. First, he reminds us that “Jesus alone has fulfilled the Scriptures.” From his virgin birth, to minute details concerning his death, to his resurrection and ascension into heaven, and then in the ministry of his apostles, Jesus precisely fulfilled scores of Old Testament prophecies. In fact, one of the main purposes of his miracles was to fulfill the Scriptures. On one occasion when John the Baptist was in prison and sent messengers to ask Jesus if he really was the One, Jesus replied in this way: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” (Mt. 11:4-6). If you will read with an open mind the Gospel records of Jesus’ life, you will see his proof in his saving deeds.

Secondly, Boice points out the healing that Jesus has worked in the hearts of millions. People are hurt by the sins of others, and we grieve the losses of death. Some have failed in life; others have unfulfilled dreams. But those who know the presence of Christ in their hearts can testify to the healing he alone can bring. One of our hymns says:

I have no help but thine, nor do I need
Another arm save thine to lean upon;
It is enough, my Lord, enough indeed;
My strength is in thy might; thy might alone.⁸

Thirdly, Boice notes the distinctive impact that Jesus has had all through the history of the world. It is not claiming too much to say that “Jesus has launched the only great and lasting social changes the world has ever seen.” Boice explains:

⁸ Horatius Bonar, *Here, O My Lord, I See Thee Face to Face*, 1857.

At the time of Christ's coming the world was a place of great cruelty and horror. Slavery was universally practiced and accepted. Gladiatorial contests brought literal death before the eyes of millions for amusement. Unwanted children were exposed upon the hillsides to die... It was a barbarous age.

But Jesus changed that. He came, not with a social program alone, but with a new ethic founded upon a new life that was his life within all who should follow him...

The greatest changes took place during the reigns of the emperor Constantine and Justinian. Cruel sports, such as those of the arena, were checked, for Christians opposed them. Laws came into being that protected the slave... Children were given legal rights that they had never before possessed. Hospitals and orphanages came into being... At the time of the recovery of the gospel during the Reformation period... we find Zwingli instituting social reforms at Zurich and Calvin creating jobs for the thousands of refugees who thronged the streets of Geneva... The register in which [Zwingli's] rules were recorded regarding the care of beggars still exists, and the inscription at the top of the page begins, "Be merciful, says the Lord, as your Father in heaven is merciful."⁹

This does not mean that Christians have never done wrong things or failed to live up to Jesus' calling. But, looking on the record of healing and caring that Jesus has directly inspired and empowered through his people, we can only echo for you the sentiment of the believers at the temple: "What more could Jesus do to show his saving grace? Especially when we remember that he died for the forgiveness of our sins and provides eternal life for all who believe, only a great obstinance could refuse to yield faith to Jesus.

THE TIME IS SHORT

But, as Jesus reminded his hearers, the time to accept him is not without end. "I will be with you a little longer," Jesus said (Jn. 7:33). Jesus could see his cross drawing near. The time for Jerusalem was indeed short; their long-awaited Savior had come, and in rejecting him their only hope for salvation would be lost.

The time is short for us, too. We do not know how much longer God will suffer the world's ungrateful rejection of his Son. We do not know when Jesus will return. We do not know the length of our own

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), I:573-574.

lives. Therefore, the prophet Isaiah calls to us, saying: “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near” (Isa. 55:6).