

Life of Christ, Part 10: Jesus' opposition

This is the 10th in a [12-part series](#) looking at the life of Christ.

Could the conflict that led to the crucifixion of Christ have been avoided? In theory, the answer is yes, but in practice, it's no. A peaceful resolution of that conflict would have required that one side or the other – that is to say, Jesus or those who sought his death – compromise in a way that neither was prepared to do.

For Jesus, whose very name means “God saves,” it would have meant repudiating his vocation as Messiah, including giving up preaching the Gospel of God's kingdom and inviting others to become part of it. Since doing those things was willed by the Father and Jesus was wholly faithful to the Father's will, abandoning his ministry was something he could not and would not do.

For their part, his opponents were hostile and unyielding from the start, and by the end, they had become murderous. Telling themselves that serving God required getting rid of Jesus, they had no choice but to kill him – or, in this case, get the Roman occupiers of the country to do that for them.

Sadducees and Pharisees

To fully understand how things stood, it's necessary to know something about Jesus' principal opponents. Two groups whose names appear repeatedly in the Gospels stand out: the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

Both groups undoubtedly included good people who were sincere in their adherence to their beliefs. In “voluntarily closing their eyes against the light of Christ,” as St. Josemaría

Escrivá puts it, they felt they were doing the right thing – defending their familiar structure of religious beliefs and practices against the challenge presented by a backwoods rabbi who came preaching an unfamiliar version of religion at odds with what they had been taught.

The Sadducees might best be described as Jewish fundamentalists. In religious terms, they were opposed to any additions or, as they would have called them, novelties beyond the written Law, such as the idea of a life after death. Although they were patriotic Jews, they supported a working relationship with the Roman occupiers. The Jewish upper class – officials, wealthy merchants and landowners, and many of the Temple priests – were Sadducees. Being supporters of the status quo, they naturally opposed the radical, unsettling message of Christ.

Doctrinally opposed to the Sadducees were the Pharisees. They, too, insisted on strict observance of the Jewish Law, but for them, the Law extended to the body of oral teaching developed in recent centuries by those “Doctors of the Law” whom the Gospels frequently mention. Their attitude toward the Romans and the Roman occupation was separatist and deeply resentful. Jesus’ criticism of people who insisted on the minute observance of religious externals at the expense of true religion’s inner spirit of mercy and love naturally turned them against him.

Pope Benedict suggests that Jesus’ frequent use of “the enigmatic term ‘Son of Man’” in referring to himself presents in capsule form “all that is most original and distinctive about the figure of Jesus. ... He comes from God, and he is God. But that is what makes him – having assumed human nature – the bringer of true humanity.” Just as, one might add, it is also what makes his condemnation and death at the hands of a peculiar coalition of Pharisees and Sadducees very nearly inevitable.

The conflict

The conflict between Jesus and his opponents can be seen taking shape all through the Gospels. Take, for example, a compact stretch in Chapters 5 and 6 of the Gospel of Luke in which the following things happen in quick succession.

Seeing the faith of those who have brought a paralytic to him, Jesus says, "As for you, your sins are forgiven." The "scribes and Pharisees" react at once: "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who but God alone can forgive sins?" Jesus promptly responds by healing the man (Lk 5:20-25).

After calling the tax collector Levi – now, Matthew – to follow him, Jesus joins other tax collectors and disreputables of the local community at a celebratory dinner given by Levi. The Pharisees demand, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus replies, "I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners" (Lk 5:29-32).

As Jesus and his disciples walk through a field on a Sabbath, the disciples satisfy their hunger by plucking and eating grain. Observing this blatant violation of Sabbath law, some Pharisees say, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath?" Jesus answers, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath" (Lk 6:1-5).

Breaking Sabbath law, hobnobbing with tax collectors and public sinners, implying that he has the authority to do what only God can do – these naturally appear to be grievous offenses against all that is good and true in the eyes of the people of sincere but tragically narrow vision who are quick to pass hostile judgment on Jesus.

Unlike the three synoptic Gospels, which describe events that occur mainly in Galilee, St. John's Gospel is set largely in Jerusalem on the occasion of several Jewish feasts. This allows the author to concentrate on describing the conflict as

it took shape between Jesus and those who made up the religious and intellectual leadership class of Judaism in that day. Especially instructive are clashes recounted in Chapters 7 to 10 – late in Jesus' public career, that is.

In the last of these, he is in Jerusalem for the feast of the Dedication – Hanukkah – a winter festival celebrating Israel's liberation from Syrian oppression and the rededication of the Temple of Solomon (cf. Jn 10:22-39). He is walking in the new Temple's Portico of Solomon when a group of his critics confronts him. "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly," they demand.

"I told you, and you do not believe," he replies, pointing to his "works" – his miracles – as a testimony to his identity. "But you do not believe," he says, "because you are not among my sheep." His followers have been given him by his Father, he adds, and "the Father and I are one." Furious now, his questioners take up stones to stone him. For which of my good works, he asks, do you stone me? Not for your good works, they reply, "but for blasphemy. You, a man, are making yourself God."

Crime of blasphemy

Here is the heart of their case against him: His crime is blasphemy; he makes himself God. And now Jesus delivers his definitive reply: "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If it calls them gods to whom the word of God came ... can you say that the one whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world blasphemes because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? If I do not perform my Father's works, do not believe me; but if I do them ... believe the works, so that you may realize [and understand] that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

"[Then] they tried again to arrest him," John records, "but he escaped from their power." But now it is only a matter of time

before the end.

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