

## **Expediency or Faithfulness**

### *John Chapter 11*

Our theme is the difference between doing what looks as though it will achieve the desired result even though it is wrong, in contrast to doing what appears to be disastrous because God says it is right.

Not all expediency is sinful, but when biblical principle is put to one side it is. We see this sinful expediency practised constantly in the political field, the business world and, alas, even in the professing Church of Jesus Christ.

In this passage of Scripture, the Lord Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead. Yet even among those who witnessed this there were those whose hatred for Christ only increased. This reminds us that the reason men do not believe the gospel is not due to some merely intellectual difficulty or a lack of adequate 'proof'. It is because the will is in bondage to sin. Men love darkness rather than light. And so some "went their way to the Pharisees to tell them what things Jesus had done" (v46). This resulted in a meeting of the Sanhedrin, or at least a committee of that body.

#### **1. THE SANHEDRIN'S SELF-CENTRED UNFAITHFULNESS (vv47-48)**

The Sanhedrin was made up of scribes and elders along with the chief priests. Although the High Priest presided, it was essentially an eldership body, indeed it was the highest such body in Israel, rather like a General Assembly or Synod of a presbyterian church. It was a religious body. Until the New Testament age, Israel was the professing Church of God, though now very corrupt. At this point, then, the Sanhedrin was a Council or Synod of the Church of God. Let us notice:-

Their admission – "many miracles" (v47). How desperately they had interrogated the man born blind to find an alternative explanation as to how he could see! (John 9:17,19,24, 26). Now he had raised Lazarus from the dead. They conceded he had done many miracles. They had no choice. Yet, they did not acknowledge him as the Messiah.

Their fear – "all men will believe" (v48). To them this would be a disaster. They could not endure that their prestige and comfortable position should be endangered. Later on, even Pilate knew that their motive was envy (Matt. 27:18).

Their excuse – "and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation" (v48). To what extent they really thought the stir about Jesus would attract the attention of the Roman authorities and even result in the destruction of the Temple and the city is difficult to know. They certainly wanted to put the noble face of patriotism on their malice. Hypocrites keep up appearances even among themselves and even convince themselves that there is genuine substance to their excuses. Sin gives us great potential for wishful thinking.

Their guiding rule – "if" (v48). The basis on which they worked was unprincipled expediency or pragmatism. The Word of God was not referred to although it made an unwelcome appearance through Caiaphas when he said, "It is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not." In the face of Christ's miracles, which they ignored, they said they were afraid of the Romans and so fought against God.

This happened in the Sanhedrin of Israel, not some pagan nation. A church governed by unprincipled expediency (that is trying to achieve what it wants by wrong methods) destroys itself.

#### **2. CAIAPHAS'S WICKED SOLUTION AND GOD'S RIGHTEOUS PURPOSE (vv49-59)**

Caiaphas arrogantly dismisses his colleagues as capable of only incompetent waffle – "Ye know nothing at all" (v49). He was the man to get things done. He then indicates his wicked application of the Sanhedrin's guiding principle: "one should die for the people" (v50). Irrespective of right or wrong, he wants results. National security demands that this man die. Never mind doing what is right and leaving the consequences in the hand of God. Unbelievers must resort to pragmatism (i.e. what will apparently work), not principle (i.e. what is right before God). Only belief in an absolutely

sovereign God can prevent this.

Nevertheless, just as God used wicked Balaam to prophesy truth despite himself, so God caused his truth to be heard via the mouth of Caiaphas. Caiaphas meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. God was causing the truth of Christ as the substitute for sinners to be heard in this unprincipled court of a decaying Church. Christ would redeem a people by bearing the sins of the elect of God from all nations (vv51–52). In Christ, the Lamb of God, God would show himself a just God and Saviour (Isaiah 45:21), just as one day he will indicate his Lordship in that same Jesus (Isaiah 45:23; Philippians 2:9–11). In Christ, God is "faithful and just" (1 John 1:9) in forgiving the sins of those who call upon him. Righteousness and salvation go together with God (Psalms 85:10–11, 98:2; Isaiah 46:13, 51:5–8, 62:1).

### **3. GOD'S VERDICT ON A WORLDLY–WISE DECISION (v53)**

In v53 the decision is made – Jesus must die. In v48 they had expressed their fear of the Romans and so took the unprincipled path to avoid disaster. But did they avoid it? In AD 70, in fulfilment of Christ's word of prophecy (Matthew 24:1–2), the Romans did destroy Jerusalem and its Temple. Sometime later, as a result of a Jewish revolt, they finished the job by flattening the city and building a Roman city in its place and forbidding Jews to go anywhere near it.

The Sanhedrin had adopted a self–centred policy to avoid trouble but in due time God brought that very trouble upon them in his righteous judgement.

### **4. A LESSON IN FAITHFULNESS FROM ACTS 15**

After the resurrection of Christ, the Sanhedrin continued to 'play Church' until God's judgement fell. But in that same city another synod met. This was a synod of the continuing Church of God. Some of its leading members had been fishermen. But they had followed the Lord Jesus and through them God had caused the New Testament Church to emerge into a separate existence from the largely apostate Israel. It was to this continuing Church, pruned of unbelieving Jewish branches, that the Gentile wild branches were to be ingrafted and Jewish natural branches re–engrafted when they are turned to Christ (Romans 11:16–26). There is one continuous Church from the Old into the New Testament age. In Acts 15 God had already begun adding Gentile converts to the Jewish nucleus of the Church, especially through the preaching of a converted Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus.

A problem had arisen in Antioch. False teachers were insisting that circumcision was essential to salvation and that the Gentile converts must conform to the Old Testament ceremonies abrogated in Christ. They attacked the gospel of grace and so the apostles and elders met to deal with the matter (Acts 15:1–2).

The differences between this synod and the Sanhedrin are very obvious. They gloried in the grace of God rather than their own importance (Acts 15:11). They openly referred to the Word of God (vv14–18). Instead of delighting in imposing their own ideas they were restrained in their use of authority. They imposed only those "necessary things" which seemed good not only to themselves but also to the Holy Ghost (v28). How different! Instead of committing ecclesiastical suicide by resorting to man–made expedients, they faced the problem on the basis of God's Word, and on the basis of that Word and within its limits they exerted their authority. The sequel was that the churches were strengthened (Acts 16:4&5).

The lesson for us is clear. Illegitimate expediency does not pay in the long run. We see that in civil and national life where issues are fudged and eventually the chickens come home to roost.

In the life of the Church, in congregations or in presbyteries and synods, do we really need more clever schemers and manoeuvrers or is not faithfulness to the Word of God the need of the hour? If God is in charge of the outcome of events, surely this must be so.

In our personal lives as Christians we are also constantly faced with conflicting options are we not? Often we can do

the apparently safe things through compromising our Christian principles or else do what seems to be fraught with trouble in loving obedience to our Lord and Saviour.

Will the Lamb in the midst of the throne, the one who is Head over all things for the good of His Church, ultimately cause us to 'lose out' by being faithful? Was Caleb rather unwise to follow the Lord fully? Is this not what our sluggishness tells the world, that Christ is a poor master and that serving him wholeheartedly is a mistake? Is the truth not otherwise, that as we by grace are enabled to serve him, he more than compensates for all the contempt and scorn of the ungodly? "Rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5:41).

But perhaps you are not a Christian at all, though you have some idea of what a Christian is. You know that being a real Christian would involve you in loss of popularity and in ridicule. And so you are quietly 'looking after number one'. Your lifestyle is respectable and churchgoing. Essentially, however, you do not want any ripples on your tranquil existence. Your motive is self-love. This is the height of short-sightedness and sinful expediency. You must repent and turn to Christ. Your self-preservation policy leads to eternal ruin. "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Proverbs 14:12). Turn to Christ, the great sin-bearer, who died the just for the unjust. Do so before God in his wrath brings down his judgement on your self-love.

*"For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36).*

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