

Why didn't Jesus fight back?

By Dean Merrill

When the Son of God showed up on this planet and began ministering, He triggered mass confusion. After all, He had no ties to the Jerusalem establishment. He lacked a rabbinical education. He wasn't from the priestly tribe of Levi. He declared openly more than once, "Moses said ... but I say ..." He challenged everything from Sabbath protocol to temple fund raising.

People tried to find an appropriate category for Him. Troublemaker? Guru? Populist? Rebel? Egoist? Crusader? Even son of Beelzebub? Yes, but ... well, no ... on the other hand ... back and forth they went.

The New Testament is an experience in paradigm shift. What Jesus came to be and say and do collided sharply with past assumptions. He spoke of a Kingdom you couldn't see,

whereas the Jews

had labored for

centuries

to build

and then

rebuild a

n a t i o n

that was

tangible.

He taught

that you

didn't need

to seek re-

venge or settle

old scores; you could forgive and walk away. He criticized sin, but mainly among the religiously inclined; He was strangely quiet about the sins of the Roman occupation troops or the caravan traders who came through.

In a musical play about the life of Christ, *The Choice*, a handsome, young, single Roman centurion named Marcus notices a somewhat spunky Jewish maiden named Hannah. One day Hannah coaxes him into going along to hear the itinerant from Nazareth, who's speaking on a hillside nearby.

On the way, they briefly argue about whether Roman justice is fair, and what role a Messiah might play in Israel's political future. Hannah says, "I don't pretend to be wise ... but I do know that Jesus is special. He's different. He's not changing governments, Marcus. He's changing *people*."

Jesus was in the business of cleaning up society one person at a time, from the inside. He held out little hope for reforming societal systems or getting pagans to behave better through public pressure. He called for a revolution of the heart.

Eventually His views were brought to a painfully personal level when He was arrested and thrown into the gears of a manifestly corrupt legal system. Pilate began to cross-examine him, and the interchange quickly went off track. This defendant did not beg for His life, uphold His honor, engage in name-dropping or do any of the usual things a man on trial would do. When Pilate wondered aloud what was really going on, Jesus replied, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the

Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36, NIV).

Why not fight? Why should not Jesus' disciples push every lever within their reach to save the neck of their innocent leader? Because His kingdom was not of this world. His movement did not play by the world's rules. He had taught the futility of fighting to gain earthly advantage. A few hours earlier in the Garden, a disciple had temporarily forgotten that lesson and pulled out his sword. Jesus sharply rebuked him: "No more of this!" (Luke 22:51).

Years later, one of Jesus' close followers explained, "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). Certainly Pontius Pilate was not apt to judge justly, but then Pontius Pilate was not the ultimate referee. The viewpoint of the heavenly Judge would prevail in the end.

We must not dismiss this behavior by Jesus as a special one-time case due to the fact that the world's redemption through death on the cross was at stake. While that is true, the mindset of Jesus before Pilate is entirely consistent with the rest of His life. It is also what the apostles took with them once He ascended and they went out to impact the first-century world for God.

For some reason, Jesus focused on people-changing rather than system-changing. Did He know something we don't? ■

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