

Good Friday

Jesus on Trial: The Conspiracy

Selected Texts

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Jesus on Trial: The Conspiracy¹

Introduction

I admit that I love a *conspiracy*!

In 1995 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America met in Dallas, TX. After the conclusion of the General Assembly I had a day to visit in Dallas before traveling back home.

I visited the Grassy Knoll at the Dealey Plaza, right beside the Texas School Book Depository, the place from which President John F. Kennedy was shot. I listened to a vendor, who sold me a book and told me the “real” story about the death of the president.

I read various accounts about the assassination of President Kennedy. Many of those accounts promoted the conspiracy theory behind the assassination of the president.

I saw the Oliver Stone movie called *JFK*, in which Stone argued for a conspiracy behind the death of President Kennedy.

Now, whether or not you believe that there was a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy is not what I want to talk about tonight. However, I do want to bring to your attention the greatest conspiracy in all of history—and that is the conspiracy to kill Jesus Christ.

Before Jesus died on Good Friday, he actually went through not one but two court trials in less than 24 hours prior to his death.

But before the first trial of Jesus, there was a conspiracy.

Lesson

Tonight, I would like to examine briefly the conspiracy behind the death of Jesus Christ.

I. The Participation of Leaders in the Conspiracy

First, notice the participation of leaders in the conspiracy.

¹ The material for this sermon comes from James Montgomery Boice & Philip Graham Ryken, *Jesus on Trial* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 21-31.

The conspiracy to kill Jesus was hatched in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas. Jewish leaders met to decide how to get rid of Jesus. We read in Matthew 26:3-5, “Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, ‘Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people.’”

Caiaphas and his cohorts were among the most highly respected men in Jerusalem. The chief priests were the religious leaders, the ones to whom people turned when they had questions about God and faith. The elders of the people were the political leaders, the ones who led the people. They were members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jewish people. Together these priests and politicians formed an unholy alliance. Their aim was not simply to silence Jesus but to do away with him altogether.

Now, according to the law, “A person is guilty of conspiracy with another person or persons to commit a crime if, with intent of promoting or facilitating its commission, he agrees . . . that . . . one or more of them will engage in conduct which constitutes such crime or . . . solicitation to commit such crime.”²

The chief priests and the elders of the people did the latter. They solicited someone to commit a crime. They wanted someone to kill Jesus.

Why did they want to get rid of Jesus? The *religious leaders* hated Jesus because he had a knack for exposing their secret sins. Whenever Jesus taught about hypocrisy, which he did frequently, they had the sneaking suspicion that he was talking about them, and usually they were right about this (Matthew 21:45). They also hated Jesus because he claimed to be God. They simply refused to believe that Jesus was divine; in fact, they believed that he was blasphemous, and in those days blasphemy was punishable in Jewish law by death (see Leviticus 24:13-16).

They were wrong, of course. Jesus really *was* God! Jesus had

² Pennsylvania Code 18 Pa.C.S.A. #903(a).

demonstrated this truth by his many miracles, but the religious leaders closed their eyes to the truth.

The *political leaders* hated Jesus because of his popularity. Lack of popularity is the last thing any politician wants. Just a few days prior to this gathering in the palace of the high priest, Jesus had entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Tens of thousands of people lined the streets, waving palm branches and welcoming Jesus as their rightful king. The politicians knew that they could never compete with such a popular figure. And so Jesus was dangerous to them because he threatened their popularity and authority.

However, the conspiracy to get rid of Jesus was stymied because Jerusalem was crowded with people who had come for the Passover. Jesus was too popular to attack in public, and so they needed to find a much more discreet way to accomplish their goal.

Their opportunity to move ahead with their goal to kill Jesus came from someone most unexpected.

II. The Participation of Judas in the Conspiracy

Second, observe the participation of Judas in the conspiracy.

One of Jesus' closest disciples, "one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?'" (Matthew 26:14-15a).

The chief priests could hardly believe what they were hearing! One of Jesus' closest associates was willing to deliver Jesus over to the chief priests. "And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him" (Matthew 26:15b-16).

Why did Judas want to get rid of Jesus? It is not really clear why Judas wanted to get rid of Jesus. He may have been disillusioned. Perhaps he was looking for a Messiah who would overthrow the Roman government and bring the Jews back to political power. Or perhaps he was simply greedy. After all, Judas served as the treasurer for Jesus and the Twelve. The apostle John actually

accused Judas of being a thief, “and having charge of the money-bag he used to help himself to what was put into it” (John 12:6). And so Judas became disillusioned because Jesus was not doing what Judas thought he would do.

But, there were others also involved in the conspiracy.

III. The Participation of Us All in the Conspiracy

Third, note the participation of us all in the conspiracy.

Jews are often blamed for the death of Jesus. In fact, much harm has resulted from the view that the Jews are “Christ-killers,” to which many Jews in Nazi Germany could attest.

Nevertheless, it is an irrefutable fact that the Jews did conspire to kill Jesus. We have just read about it. In fact, they even took full responsibility for their actions. When the Roman governor tried to talk them out of having Jesus crucified, they said, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:25).

But the Jews were not the only ones involved in the death of Jesus. An Idumean king named Herod handed Jesus over to the Romans. A Roman governor named Pontius Pilate eventually ordered Jesus to be crucified. Roman soldiers nailed Jesus to a cross and watched him die. The Jews brought Jesus to trial, but in the end the Gentiles killed him.

These facts are important because they show that all of us were involved in the conspiracy against Jesus.

Are we any better than the men who were involved at the time of Jesus’ death? “No, not at all!” says the Bible. “Both Jews and [Gentiles], are under sin, as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.” (Romans 3:9-12)

If none is righteous, then we too are among the accused.

One man who understood this was the artist Stanley Spencer, who often painted biblical scenes set in his native English village. In one painting Spencer gave a whole new perspective on the crucifixion. The cross itself is in the center of the painting, but with the figure of Christ obscured. The viewer's attention is drawn not to Christ but to the other people in the painting. They are the ordinary people from the artist's home town, wearing their ordinary work clothes. Everyone in the town is looking on and participating in the crucifixion of Jesus. And that is exactly Spencer's point—every one of us is a participant in the conspiracy against Jesus.

But the most remarkable participant in the conspiracy has not yet been named.

IV. The Participation of God in the Conspiracy

And finally, don't miss the participation of God in the conspiracy.

The most amazing thing of all is that God was involved in the conspiracy.

God knew that eventually there would be a conspiracy to get rid of Jesus. God allowed for Jesus to be put on trial. God also allowed for his Son to be crucified. God knew that it was only through the atoning death of his Son that sinners could receive forgiveness and eternal life.

After the resurrection of Jesus, he spent forty days instructing his disciples in the most intense six-week seminary program ever! Finally, they understood exactly who Jesus was and what he had accomplished.

And so they explained that the conspiracy against Jesus was actually part of *God's predestined plan!* They said to the Jewish leaders who had participated in the conspiracy to kill Jesus, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men

[i.e., the Romans], God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. . . . God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:23-24, 36).

Jesus’ disciples were clear that the Jews and Gentiles alike were responsible for the wrongful death of Jesus. But they also emphasized the deeper conspiracy, that God was using their wicked deed to bring about his own divine purpose of salvation for the elect.

Conclusion

God is absolutely sovereign. He is in sovereign control of all events.

The religious leaders conspired against Jesus because they thought he was making a blasphemous claim of being God. But Jesus really is God!

The political leaders conspired against Jesus because they thought that he was a threat to their popularity. But instead of eliminating his popularity, Jesus is the most worshiped being in the world today!

Judas conspired against Jesus because he was disillusioned that Jesus was not providing what he thought he should provide. But countless numbers of people can testify today that Jesus delivers far more than they could ever hope to dream.

We are all participants in the conspiracy against Jesus because we are sinners. But Jesus took our sin upon himself and paid the penalty for our sin so that we could be set free from the penalty of sin.

And God the Father was ultimately behind the conspiracy, carrying out his plans and purposes to bring glory to himself and good to his elect through the death of his Son.

Let us thank and praise God for all that he accomplished for us through the conspiracy against Jesus. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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