

Q. Why did Pilate find nothing with which to charge Jesus?

A. The answer to this question is more important than we might at first think. Since at least the time of the Edict of Thessalonica in AD 380, Christendom has ignored with grave consequences Pilate's inability to charge Jesus with a crime. Today, millions of American Christians also ignore this matter. So, what is the answer to the question, and why is it so vital?

Pilate's Decision

The portion of Jesus' appearance before Pilate that is relevant to our question is found in Matthew 27:11-14; Mark 15:1-5; Luke 23:1-5; and John 18:28-38. In Luke 23:2, we read of the Jews' accusation to Pilate, "They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting the nation, forbidding paying taxes to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king'" (*World English Bible*, WEB—used throughout unless otherwise noted). Another possible way to translate this is as it is found in the *Weymouth New Testament*: "...claiming to be himself an anointed king." Either way, we see that the Jews were looking for a way to bring a secular accusation against Jesus.

The claim about Jesus forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar was an outright lie. Jesus taught just the opposite (see Luke 20:22-25). And the part about Jesus claiming to be a king was only part of the story. But they wanted to get past Pilate's suspicion that their differences with Jesus were merely religious and had nothing to do with Roman law: "Pilate therefore said to them, 'Take him yourselves, and judge him according to your law'" (John 18:31a).

The Jews' accusation that Jesus claimed to be a king got Pilate's interest. If this was true, Jesus could be charged with treason against Caesar. So, as each of the Gospels records, Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33). The next words of Jesus recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke are, "So you say." But John records more dialog before this, and

it is in this dialog that we find the answer to our question. Let's read John 18:33-38 in its entirety:

Pilate therefore entered again into the Praetorium, called Jesus, and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered him, "Do you say this by yourself, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate answered, "I'm not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered you to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My Kingdom is not of this world. If my Kingdom were of this world, then my servants would fight, that I wouldn't be delivered to the Jews. But now my Kingdom is not from here." Pilate therefore said to him, "Are you a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this reason I have been born, and for this reason I have come into the world, that I should testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" When he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no basis for a charge against him."

Notice that even though Jesus admitted to Pilate that He was a king, Pilate concluded that there was no basis for a charge against Him. Why?

The reason Pilate found no basis for a charge against Jesus was that Jesus said, "My Kingdom is not of this world...my Kingdom is not from here." The Roman governor wanted to clarify what Jesus meant, so he asked Jesus again, "Are you a king then?" Jesus responded, "You say that I am a king." This is apparently what is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke as, "So you say." Jesus then elaborates, "For this reason I have been born, and for this reason I have come into the world, that I should testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

Jesus told Pilate that His kingdom is not of this world and that those who listen to Him—His followers in His kingdom—are people who are "of the truth." This was a kingdom unlike any Pilate had ever heard of. It was not of this world and it consisted of people "of the truth." To Pilate, this was a dreamy, philosophical, abstract, airy-fairy kingdom that was certainly no threat to Caesar. He responds by sneering, "What is truth?" and then declaring, "I find no basis for a charge against him." If Pilate at all suspected that Jesus wanted to establish a worldly kingdom, he would certainly have found Jesus guilty of

treason. But he did not. He was convinced that Jesus was speaking of a kingdom that had nothing to do with this world.

Distinguishing Jesus' Kingdom from Worldly Kingdoms

By stating that His kingdom is not of this world, Jesus was also saying that His kingdom is not the Jewish nation, or the Roman Empire, or any other worldly kingdom. Jesus' kingdom was not the Holy Roman Empire, or any of the nations of Europe, or the British Empire, or the United States. By saying that His kingdom is not of this world, Jesus destroyed the idea that true worship was only that which had been sanctioned by the state, an idea that had characterized the world up to that time. Jesus' followers would worship "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24) irrespective of time, place, or the government over them. But that did not mean that the governments would let them do that without persecution.

During His ministry, Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was "at hand" (see "The Gospel of the Kingdom of God" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/gospelkingdom.htm>). The kingdom was to be *in* the world: "Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, 'The kingdom of God does not come with observation; neither will they say, "Look here!" or "Look, there it is!" For behold, the kingdom of God is among you'" (Luke 17:20-21, *English Majority Text Version*, EMTV). But it was not to be *of* the world: "I have given them your word. The world hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that you would take them from the world, but that you would keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in your truth. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, even so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:14-18).

The Bible even tells us how to distinguish the two kingdoms: "He said to them, "The kings of the nations lord it over them, and those who have authority over them are called 'benefactors'" (Luke 22:25). This is what we see even to this day. Those who rule over nations exercise authority over their citizens. This may be more pronounced in dictatorships than in democracies, but it is still true for all forms of worldly government. The leaders may be admired and considered to be doing good for their people—"benefactors." But they are in control, and if you try to cross them, you will quickly find out that they hold the reigns of power.

Jesus then went on to contrast this worldly system with the way it is in the kingdom of God: "But not so with you. But one who is the greater among you, let him become as the younger, and one who is governing, as one who serves" (Luke 22:25-26). We sometimes today call people in worldly government "public servants." But, compared to what Jesus intended for the kingdom of God, that is a sham, for they really exercise authority. The contrast is even more pronounced in Matthew's account of what Jesus said: "But Jesus, having summoned them, said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, shall be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many'" (Matthew 20:25-28, EMTV). Jesus set the example for the leaders of the kingdom of God. Nothing is too lowly, even being as a slave, even giving one's life.

Yet, the leaders of the nations, whether they are aware of it or not, do serve God for the purpose of providing law and order in a sinful world. Without them, there would be chaos. The sinful people of our fallen world need to be hedged in with law. Paul says as much when he tells us in Romans 13 that we should obey the ruler (except when his orders contradict our obedience to God—Acts 4:19-29; 5:29). In saying this, Paul gives us another characteristic that distinguishes a worldly ruler: "he doesn't bear the sword in vain; for he is a servant of God, an avenger for wrath to him who does evil" (Romans 13:4).

The leaders of the kingdom of God are lowly servants, slaves giving their lives for others. The leaders of the nations lord it over their citizens, ruling with authority, and wielding the sword against transgressors. These distinguishing characteristics are important, because whenever we see the characteristics of worldly rule, we know we are not seeing the kingdom of God.

It should be simple to not get mixed up. The kingdoms of this world are, of course, of this world, and they rule over their people and wield the sword. The kingdom of God is not a kingdom of this world and does not have the characteristics of the kingdoms of this world. Further, it is not made up of the citizens of a place but, as Jesus told Pilate, people of the truth. What's more, Jesus also said that the kingdom of God can only be perceived by those who are born again, born of the Spirit (John 3:3-7).

Kingdom Confusion

But people did get mixed up. In AD 380, the Edict of Thessalonica was released jointly by Theodosius I, Gratian, and Valentinian II. It made the faith "which is now professed by the Pontiff Damasus and by Peter, Bishop of Alexandria [the bishops of Rome and Alexandria]" the official religion of the people under those emperors. It further said, "We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics, and shall not presume to give to their conventicles the name of churches. They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation and in the second the punishment of our authority which in accordance with the will of Heaven we shall decide to inflict."

In short, a certain brand of Christianity—Catholic Christianity—was now to be the established church of the empire. This union gave church leaders worldly power. Notice that those who disagreed with the Catholic Christianity of the Pontiff Damasus and Peter, Bishop of Alexandria, were branded as heretics and were to be punished by state authority—the sword. But who exercises such lordship? Who wields the sword? The rulers of this world. The very act of uniting church and state makes the church leaders worldly rulers and exposes the church that unites with the state as a counterfeit. The kingdom of God can have no union with the kingdoms of this world. It is simply not possible.

Nevertheless, with the eventual fall of the Roman Empire, the nations of Christendom all followed its example and united church and state. At first, the church was Catholic. But even those nations that later broke with Rome during the Protestant Reformation carried on in the same pattern. Many of their doctrines became more biblical, but they still set up established churches—Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, Anglican. These unions of church and state were contrary to Jesus' clear statement that His kingdom is not of this world and His leaders would not exercise worldly power.

The American Colonies

As North America was settled, its colonies were generally not much better. Most had established churches. Not seeing the contradiction

between his vision for Massachusetts and the teachings of Christ, Puritan Governor John Winthrop considered the Massachusetts Bay colony to be a "city upon a hill", watched by the world. It was to be a Puritan example to the rest of the world (especially England), a model of God's kingdom on earth.

But there were exceptions to the church-state model. After being banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for disagreeing with some of the views of the Puritans, Roger Williams founded Providence in 1636. It later grew to become Rhode Island. From the very beginning, Williams established the colony as a "shelter for persons distressed for conscience," that is, a place of religious freedom. Williams' views were utterly revolutionary.

In 1681, Charles II granted a land charter to William Penn. Penn established a government for Pennsylvania that ensured freedom of religious conviction. Something new was happening on the face of the earth. The idea that the church and state did not have to be united was gaining popularity. Although some had always known it, the concept that the kingdom of God was something that worked in the hearts of God's people and could not possibly be united with the kingdoms of this world was accepted by more people.

In 1775, the following colonies had established churches:

Connecticut—Congregational

Georgia—Anglican

Maryland—Anglican

Massachusetts—Congregational

New Hampshire—Congregational

New York*—Anglican

(*only New York City and three surrounding counties)

North Carolina—Anglican

South Carolina—Anglican

Virginia—Anglican

Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island did not have established churches.

The United States

The American Revolution was a rebellion against the God-ordained civil authorities for economic, not conscience, reasons. It was, thus, a violation of Romans 13. Nevertheless, God used it for His purposes.

Thomas Jefferson was a Deist and knew that his own religious freedoms were threatened by established churches. Supported by Baptists and other dissenters, in 1777, Jefferson drafted the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. It was enacted as state law in 1786. It stated in part "that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief, but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of Religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities." Interestingly, it also says, "And finally, that Truth is great, and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons free argument and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them."

This Virginia statute became a stepping stone to the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. It was drafted by James Madison and there is good evidence that he did it largely at the instigation of Baptists who were concerned that the United States Constitution had no safeguard for religious liberty. Prominent among these Baptists was John Leland. Leland specifically stood against the idea that the United States should be a Christian nation, stating, "The notion of a Christian commonwealth should be exploded forever...Government should protect every man in thinking and speaking freely, and see that one does not abuse another. The liberty I contend for is more than toleration. The very idea of toleration is despicable; it supposes that some have a pre-eminence above the rest to grant indulgence, whereas all should be equally free, Jews, Turks, Pagans and Christians" (*A Chronicle of His Time in Virginia*), and, "Every man must give account of himself to God, and therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in a way that he can best reconcile to his conscience. If government can answer for individuals at the day of judgment, let men be controlled by it in religious matters; otherwise, let men be free" (*Right of Conscience Inalienable*).

The First Amendment was adopted on December 15, 1791. It states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

The first part of the amendment, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion," prevents the establishment of a national religion. I want to point out here that it does not just prevent the establishment of a national church. If the word "church" appeared instead of the word "religion," then it could be argued that, while no particular denomination is favored, Christianity is the religion of the United States. But it does not say, "church." It says, "religion." This means that the First Amendment was purposely worded so as NOT to make the United States a Christian nation (or a Muslim nation, or a Jewish nation, or a Buddhist nation, or a Hindu nation, etc.).

It is important to understand that the First Amendment is not an act of toleration. It goes far beyond the acts of toleration that had been enacted in various parts of Europe. As John Leland pointed out, toleration still supposes the preeminence of one established religion that condescends to tolerate dissenters but can remove this toleration at any time. The First Amendment establishes no religion.

As Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1802 to a committee of the Danbury Baptist association in the state of Connecticut, "Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church & State."

Some reject Jefferson's interpretation of a wall of separation, arguing that it was Madison, not Jefferson, who drafted the First Amendment. But Madison interpreted it similarly, writing of the "perfect separation between the ecclesiastical and civil matters" (1822 letter to Livingston), the "line of separation between the rights of religion and the civil authority... entire abstinence of the government" (1832 letter Rev. Adams), and the "practical distinction between Religion and Civil Government as essential to the purity of both, and as guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States" (1811 letter to Baptist Churches).

Whereas the setting up of established churches had inevitably resulted in an unholy hybrid of church and state and the harrying of those who dissented, the American separation of church and state allows for Jesus' non-worldly kingdom to flourish without fear of persecution.

Whereas established churches were more hindrances than helps to people seeking the kingdom of God, the separation of church and state allows people to freely seek the truth.

Why Pilate's Decision Is Important

The reason Pilate found no guilt in Jesus is that he saw that Jesus had no plans to establish a worldly kingdom. What even unconverted Pilate realized is critical to our understanding that the kingdom of God cannot be found in any state religion. The kingdom of God is not of this world and cannot be tied to any state.

Americans today need to learn this lesson. Millions of Americans have been deluded into believing that the United States was established as a Christian nation and needs to be returned to its Christian roots. They want to repeat the tragic mistake made by the Roman Empire and followed by the nations of Europe and once again unite church and state. They want to attempt to make the kingdom of God a nation of this world. By recklessly pushing to establish Christianity as the religion of the United States, they may fan the old flames of persecution, stifle the free pursuit of the truth, and hinder the spread of the Gospel and the furtherance of Jesus' kingdom. They may succeed in making another nation of counterfeit Christianity. But they will never link the kingdom of God with the United States. The two cannot mix.

All of us need to see what Pilate accepted so long ago. It will keep us from making the blunder of trying to unite church and state. Jesus never intended to make any nation or nations of this world His kingdom. Instead, His kingdom consists of people of the truth, "delivered...out of the power of darkness, and translated...into the Kingdom of the Son of his love" (Colossians 1:13).

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

1 Peter 2:9

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