

The Controversial Jesus

All of us like to fit in with our friends, family, and associates. We prefer not to stand out and be different, especially if it is “uncool.” Our problem is that in following Jesus we are often seen as both different and uncool! The apostle John was concerned about his parishioners in Ephesus and other cities who were often intimidated by the society about them. For their sakes, he recalled that Jesus Himself underwent such controversy from those around Him.

John 7:40-52

40 When they heard these words, some of the people said, “This really is the Prophet.” 41 Others said, “This is the Christ.” But some said, “Is the Christ to come from Galilee? 42 Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” 43 So there was a division among the people over him. 44 Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

45 The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, “Why did you not bring him?” 46 The officers answered, “No one ever spoke like this man!” 47 The Pharisees answered them, “Have you also been deceived? 48 Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? 49 But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.” 50 Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, 51 “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” 52 They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.”

In order to follow Jesus Christ, we must be willing to be different. In the two paragraphs in today’s text, we can see two groups that we must learn to handle successfully.

I. **We must handle the division among the popular crowds (vv. 40-44).**

We can see in Jesus’ discourse during the Feast of Booths that the crowds were constantly confused and divided about who He is. In verse 12, at the beginning of the feast, we are told that some said, “He is a good man,” while others said, “No, he is leading the people astray.” Likewise, during the middle of the feast, we are told in verses 30 and 31 that some were seeking to arrest Him, while others actually believed in Him. And now, at the end of the feast, we have some who are saying he is “the prophet,” while others are saying, “this is the Christ,” while others are objecting and saying that His residence in Galilee disqualifies Him for both of those offices. Interestingly, the analysis in verses 41 and 42 is ironically ignorant, because Jesus obviously was born of David and born in Bethlehem. Today we also find the same ignorance among many who disagree about who Jesus is and who sometimes resent our devotion to Jesus. If we are to follow Jesus we must be ready to handle such opposition. Mother Theresa once said, “We must never be afraid to be a sign of contradiction for the world.”

II. **We must handle the contempt from cultural authorities (vv. 45-52).**

In verses 45-49, the temple officers, who were trained in religion and who exercised their own moral consciences, refused to arrest Jesus and to bring Him to the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was incensed and asked why they did not arrest Jesus, and they explained that “no one ever spoke like this man!” The response from the cultural elite is noteworthy. They claimed that the officers had been deceived and have been co-opted by an ignorant and cursed crowd. The rabbis believed that the common man in Israel was condemned because he did not study the law and therefore could not keep the law. We experience today also contempt from those who are well-trained and in prominent positions.

Eventually, one of their own, Nicodemus, appeals to reason, and they still hold him in contempt with regional bigotry and angry criticism. “Are you from Galilee too?” they ask. And then they state that no prophet arises from Galilee. This is remarkable, because both Nahum and Jonah

come from Galilee! We find that the anger of cultural elites disables their own thinking. They don't always make sense, but they will oppose those who follow Jesus closely.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does following Jesus frequently lead us into controversy? Why does that bother us?
2. Why are there always diverse opinions in society about who Jesus really is? How should we react to these opinions?
3. What is ironic about verses 41 and 42?
4. How do cultural authorities react to the temple officers in verses 47 and 48? Why did they react so strongly?
5. How do Nicodemus' fellow Pharisees respond to his advice? Why?
6. What is ironic about verse 52?

Going Deeper

1. Under what circumstances do you tend to cower before the crowds or the cultural authorities? Why?
2. How can you strengthen your approach to both the crowds and the cultural elite?