

*THE CRUCIAL HOURS*¹

The Semblance of Legality

In the name of Jesus, tried and found guilty for us sinner, dearly redeemed:

As soon as it was day, the council of the elders of the people met together, both the chief priests and experts in the law. They brought him into their Sanhedrin. (Luke 22:66 EHV)

The Jewish leaders had just had a nighttime trial for Jesus which would have convinced no impartial observer that Jesus was guilty. Yet their verdict was *guilty on all count for Jesus* – worthy of death. They beat him with their fists, spit on him, acting like a bunch of animals.

When that was over, they took a moment to recompose themselves, put on somber faces, and . . . have a trial for Jesus? But wait! They had just declared Jesus *guilty, guilty, guilty* – sort of. You see, the highest court of the Jews, the Sanhedrin, was not allowed to meet at night. Terrible things could happen in secret meetings. They were supposed to meet each day, except the Sabbath and festivals in the temple area, not under cover of darkness in the homes of high priests. All members of the Sanhedrin were supposed to be present to get at the truth, in the light of day, to have a fair trial.

So that was the problem – a secret meeting at night with some members of the Sanhedrin missing was not an official trial. So at daybreak, they convened an official meeting, a legal meeting of the Sanhedrin. As the writer of the book *The Crucial Hours* notes, “They were extremely anxious to maintain a semblance of legality.” None of those present earlier wanted to be challenged by Sanhedrin members like Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea. If one of them showed up at Pilate’s residence later and claimed that the nighttime trial was invalid, couldn’t the verdict get thrown out on a technicality?

And what about Pilate? Couldn’t he declare a mistrial? But not to worry. As you know, Pilate demonstrated later that he was not much concerned with justice. He sentenced Jesus to death even though he had found Jesus guilty of nothing. Pilate’s symbolic washing of his hands showed that he too was more interested in a **Semblance of Legality** (plausible deniability?) than in doing what was right.

Maybe there was another reason Jewish leaders held a second trial. **The Semblance of Legality** is really important if you want others to condone your evil or even applaud it as good. Proceeding by the book would enable them to say they were just doing their job. What’s more noble than doing your job, especially if it’s maintaining law and order and executing justice? These were noble men!

Have you heard this statement? “Patriotism is the last refuge for scoundrels.” It seems especially popular for a kind of false patriotism where some can wrap themselves in their nation’s flag while doing evil. Doing everything by the book? You know, the rules and regulations an organization uses to carry out its business and work. Such rules and regulations are meant to ensure that things are done, as even the Bible urges, “*in a fitting and orderly way,*” i.e., “*decently and in order.*” (1 Corinthians 14:40 NIV, KJV)

Think of the evil the Sanhedrin was willing to do to Jesus, not just for **The Semblance of Legality** but with deep concern for their beloved nation. Remember how Caiaphas had *patriotically* taken the difficult, but *noble*, stand that it would be best if one man (Jesus) die in order to preserve the nation? (John 11:50) Similarly, *Robert’s Rules of Order* can become a bully club for **The Semblance of Legality**. Make sure all rules are kept. Enforce good order, maybe not decently.... So easily the rules can be used to justify a lack of love.

¹ Adapted from NPH 2022 Lent: *The Crucial Hours*, based on the book by William Lauterbach. (NPH: 1-800-662-6022)

Think about the priest and the Levite described in Jesus' *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. (Luke 10:25-37) They passed by on the other side of the road, not helping the man dying only a few feet away. But the good news is that they were on time for their shift at the temple! They were doing their jobs!

Obviously, the Sanhedrin was an extreme example of **The Semblance of Legality** while actively doing evil. The Sanhedrin was willing to have a trial that made a mockery of justice, but they would never dream of starting that trial one minute before the appointed, legal time. As Jesus told the Pharisees (a good percentage of the Sanhedrin) on Tuesday of Holy Week, they strained at gnats while swallowing camels. (Matthew 23:24) Soon they would do this again at Pilate's residence, insisting he come out to them so they could avoid entering a gentile house and becoming ceremonially unclean. See, they wanted to celebrate the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which immediately followed. No qualms about bullying Pilate into lynching Jesus, but never become ceremonially unclean by stepping into Pilate's house!

Did you see the TV show where a man walked into a restaurant and killed someone in cold blood? On his way out, he stopped at the counter, took a mint, and left a dime. Later when captured, he was asked why he bothered leaving a dime to pay for the mint. "I'm not a thief!" So murdering Jesus, the Sanhedrin didn't want to be breakers of the ceremonial law!

Here's the scary part. If the highly religious Jewish Sanhedrin could fall into the trap of fake legality, couldn't we? Don't we have our blind spots? Isn't it much easier than *actual* legality and morality? A **Semblance of Legality** can be part-time. True obedience that God demands must be full-time, in every area of your life. A **Semblance of Legality** easily impresses others with your by-the-book faithfulness. And won't people assume that everything you do must be legal and upright?

And yet the conscience will accuse while the evil foe from hell turns up the volume. If you were in law enforcement, honestly working for justice, could you hold up the law of the land and still face God whose justice is absolute? Could you stand before God's court and not be condemned for two-faced hypocrisy of some sort? Must we assume that true Christianity isn't about doing things by the book?

Here's where we must turn away from the judges and focus on the One being tried by two Jewish courts and soon to be tried by two Gentile courts as Pilate and Herod both conclude that Jesus is not actually guilty of any crime deserving death. These trials only proved the answer to Jesus' question mere months before: "**Who of you can convict me of sin?**" (John 8:46) The world hates Jesus and his followers (John 15:8) for no other reason than the good they do. Guilt clouds the conscience and good judgment.

Look at Jesus doing everything by the Good Book. Remember our Ash Wednesday service where Jesus said, "**I will keep the Passover**"? God's Son kept every bit of God's laws. His was not a bare minimum – Section 4-B, subsection 22(a)1 – bare minimum Christianity but the absolute fulfillment of God's law in perfect love. Think back to Gethsemane. Jesus was legally bound not to attempt murder, and therefore did not order swords for defense. He was *not* legally bound to heal the man whose ear Peter cut off, but Jesus healed the man anyway. That's true Christian love for my neighbor, not just as an example, or some **Semblance of Legality**, but the full spirit of God's law lived in our place.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians where the Holy Spirit inspired those choice words, "**decently and in order**" (KJV), we are also told that "**God is not a God of disorder, but of peace.**" Consider this carefully. The Sanhedrin could say, "God is a God of order." So could Hitler's SS in a medallion that read: *Alles in Ordnung!* (Everything in order!) – or else! Brutally enforced.

God's **peace** comes to us through Christ who willingly stood before the court in our place, not just human courts on his way to the cross, but God's court as Jesus hung there between the earth and sky. In God's court where **mercy and truth meet together**, where **righteousness and peace kiss each other** (Psalm 85:10) God's perfect justice is fully satisfied. Every sin, every shred of guilt, every whisp of hypocrisy is washed away in the cleansing flood of blood from Emmanuel's veins. And because he has done this for us, forget some **Semblance of Legality**; we already have true holiness in Jesus. Striving higher and better, we gladly obey God's commands from the heart, God's heart of love. Amen.

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