

Body of Christ: Confronting

1st Kings 21:15-24; Jn 2:13-22; Acts 5:1-11

Confrontation is not a nice word. We generally avoid it like the plague. We have heard so often of turning the other cheek that confrontation sounds anti-Christian. We are tempted to ignore issues that call for confrontation, since the very idea makes us uncomfortable. Perhaps we equate confrontation with animosity. Perhaps we just don't understand what confrontation is all about and consider it too risky.



Elijah's ministry was filled with confrontation. God used him to challenge people to faith and understanding who *Yahweh* truly was. It didn't make him popular with the king, but that was not Elijah's fault. The king had distanced himself from following *Yahweh's* will and direction. As *Yahweh's* spokesman, it was Elijah's responsibility to confront Ahab with the true nature of his actions. While we may overlook it, in Elijah's words of warning and pronouncement of doom, there is room for Ahab to repent. Ahab chooses to harden his heart against God and live under the direction of his own desires.

Jesus' life and ministry conjures up many pictures in our minds. "Softly and Tenderly" has etched its own image on our minds of a Jesus who never spoke a harsh word and never made people uncomfortable. The Gospel of John discards that image immediately in its first chapter, clarifying the point in chapter two with a picture of how Jesus made people uncomfortable.

Temple worship in Jerusalem had veered from the definitions and requirements in the Pentateuch. Religious leaders determined which animals might be sacrificed, effectively ruling out animals that might have been brought in by individuals. The Temple tax had to be paid in coinage authorized by Temple authorities. To this end, moneychangers set up their booths, charging four to eight percent profit from those who did not have appropriate coinage. This use of the Temple grounds for economic activities was thwarting the purpose of worship.

Disgusted with the way the Temple was being used for extortion and reasons other than worship, Jesus fashioned a whip of cords to drive the offenders away. Jesus could not condone the actions of these merchants and moneychangers. He also could not simply ignore them. In His role as prophet, mediating God's presence, let alone being God incarnate, this abuse of the Temple was not something for Him to ignore. He confronted the offenders in a very direct manner, reminding them of how Scripture called for the Temple to be dedicated solely to the worship of God. It was not a place for serving selfish interests. They had transformed it into a place of greed, extortion, and profit.

Jesus confronted the moneychangers and merchants with the inappropriateness of their actions. He confronted the rest of the people as well. In all actuality, they were just as guilty for allowing the inappropriate activities to go on. We often see Jesus portrayed as whipping the people, but He used the whip to drive out the animals. He did not set the birds free, but ordered the merchants to remove them. He confronted them with the issue at hand and dealt with that issue alone.

We often portray Jesus' actions as righteous anger, but that goes beyond the gospel texts. He modeled confrontation not in anger, but with authority. In the same breath, he drove out the merchants and taught the people to worship God. Matthew links Jesus' cleansing of the Temple to receiving and curing the blind and lame. Jesus confronted the excesses and brought people back to the heart of worship.

In Acts, Luke records an account of Barnabas giving up land he owned to share the proceeds with needy believers. On the heels of that account, Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property, pretending to do the same as Barnabas. They intended to appear to be what they were not. From Peter's words of confrontation, their actions were a challenge to God's knowledge. Peter confronted them with the false character of their piety. He confronted them with their hypocrisy, clarifying that God is above our ability to deceive.

Luke says the fear came upon those who heard of the event. This is the standard expression for awe before God. God's confrontation through Peter awakened in the community a sense of respect and worship that seems to have been lacking. Notice that Peter is not involved in the death of either Ananias or Sapphira. His only role is to challenge them to clarify their stand and speak for truth. He does not actually condemn them, but seems completely surprised at the false nature of their actions. He announces God's message, but God is the One who acts in justice.

Confrontation is an emotionally difficult issue for us to deal with. In part, because it requires us to have courage to match our convictions. Elijah did not take lightly the matter of confronting the king. He knew that it might result in his own death. Jesus was well aware that raising issue with the misuse of the Temple would have consequences. He knew that there would be opposition, but He could not be silent on important issues. Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira in an uncomfortable situation. There was a risk in confronting them. What if he had misunderstood God? What if he himself were wrong? He decided that taking the risk to follow God's direction was more important than facing the risks of ignoring it.

Confrontation is not easy for us. It is not something to take lightly. To confront, we must have courage to match our convictions. We must also allow God to act as God desires. Confrontation is not the same as attacking others, nor the same as anger. It is speaking the Word of God with integrity, knowing that there may be a personal cost involved. It is having the courage to stand for our convictions.

As the body of Christ, we are called to confront the world with the truth of God's message. We are called to live lives that reflect God's will, character, and love. We are called to awaken others to the demands of the gospel—a life laid upon the altar of faith.

Are we up to the challenge? Do we have the courage to stand for our convictions, while discerning our own failings? Will we be the body of Christ, or will we serve our own interests instead? Confrontation may be risky. It must be applied with humility rather than anger.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*