

“We Wanted a Rock Star”

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I have always wondered how in the world that could happen, that one day they would yell “Hosanna,” and have so much trust and then so quickly turn on Jesus before they even gave Jesus a chance. Then I was listening to one of those Great Courses that get me in trouble. It was by a psychologist who was speaking on influence, and he was quoting a psychologist named Stanley Milgram whose seminal work was entitled “Obedience to Authority.” I needed to find out what influenced those people that changed from “Hosanna” to “Crucify,” and I think that I found it with an experiment that this psychologist did.

In the 1960s he was saying he needed to ask himself why human beings could consciously and unconsciously try to make sense of a confusing and upsetting world in the years after World War II. How in the world did the Nazi party in Germany come to reign? How could so many good, faithful Christian people end up murdering 6 million Jews and 13 million people? How in the world could they do that when they had a Christian moral binding to their hearts?

He decided that he wanted first to answer the question about whether or not people could be influenced by others and how easily. So he said, “Let’s look at somebody who yawns.” Do you ever yawn in a room and all of a sudden everybody else is yawning right with you? Do you know scientists don’t even know why we respond with a yawn; nobody has a definitive answer for why we do it. The psychologist said we have an issue because it isn’t just yawning that we do in response to other people. We have so many unconscious reactions that we do in response to other people all of the time. And some of those have profound implications on how we treat each other. So he starts this experiment.

He puts three people together, two are in on it and one doesn’t know what is going on. The two that are in on it are the person acting as the authority figure, the teacher – who doesn’t know that this is a fix, and the learner. It is a very famous experiment you might have heard of before: They draw straws, the teacher and the learner to decide which one is going to be the teacher and which is the learner. (They are all college students at Yale University.) But it is fixed so the one that is in on it is always the one that becomes the learner; the teacher gets the short straw.

So, the goal of this test is to have an authority figure say, “Push the button.” The teacher is the one that pushes the button and the learner is the one that gets hooked up and gets zapped every time the button is pushed. They are trying to find out how many times somebody is willing to push the button and allow somebody else to have electrodes shocked through their body. So they ask the question: “Now, I’m going to give you two words and you need to tell me which word is out of order. So, I will say them fast and then you have to remember the words and then remember the order. Every time you are wrong, the authority person tells the teacher to push the button and the learner gets zapped with the electricity. Every time they miss an answer the voltage gets higher and they get zapped with a larger, more powerful amount of electricity.”

Now remember, the authority figure standing over the shoulder of the teacher knows that this isn't real, and the learner is an actor who knows they are going to have to act like they got zapped. But the teacher who is pushing the button doesn't know; they think it's real.

So they ask the questions, the learner gets the question wrong and the authority figure says, "Push the button." It starts out really mild. The learner goes, "Ooh, ah." Then they ask a couple more questions. They get one wrong, now all of a sudden it's more than an "Ooh, ah," it's "ouch." It continues to get worse and pretty soon there is a scream every time the button is pushed. It continues on and on to the very moment where the person is almost unconscious.

All the authority figure had to say was one of four sentences to make it happen. One of the statements was "please continue" when they pause. Because every one of those teachers who pushed the button knew something was wrong they didn't want to hurt the other person. So the authority figure leaned over and said, "Please continue," and they pushed the button. Then when they would stop again because it was getting bad and the person was crying, they would say "the experiment requires you to continue," and they pushed the button.

They stopped again when the person was drooling – literally. "It is absolutely essential that you continue," and they pushed the button. "You have no other choice but to go on." And even when it said on the machine with the button they are pushing that it was 450 volts of electricity and it said danger - severe shock - over 80 percent of the people pushed the button. They didn't threaten the teacher. The authority figure didn't say that they were going to be the next one to get zapped if they didn't push the button, all they said was "please continue; the experiment requires you to continue; it's absolutely essential that you continue and you have no other choice, you must go on." And over 80 percent of the time they pushed the button.

They were shocked by the findings. How could good, healthy, faithful, caring people hurt each other to that level just because there was an authority figure leaning over them saying "do it"?

Well, for years they studied this in psychiatric clinics and university labs constantly, over and over again you would have students in the new millennium saying, "Well, I would never do that, society has changed so much from the 1960s. We are so much more enlightened."

Thankfully there was a professor at Santa Clara University named Jerry Burger. Jerry Burger decided he was sick and tired of hearing how much more enlightened people are now, and so in 2009 at Santa Clara University, they redid the test. Well, we are a little bit more enlightened, so they toned it down. First, every one of the participants that was going to end up being the teacher pushing the button. They said you have to take a psychiatric evaluation to make sure we are not going to hurt you emotionally; if there is depression or other issues that could really scar you. Thirty-eight percent of the students

failed the test and were not allowed to proceed. Imagine how that would have elevated the scores if they were allowed to participate in pushing the button?

Another thing they said is, “We don’t want just college age students because frankly college age kids are kind of brutal to each other anyway, so we will have all ages. We will have some college age, but we are also going to include some others; we are going to have everyone in the ages of 18- 81 years old.” The average age in this group in 2009 was 42 years of age. That should have also backed off on the process. There shouldn’t have been so many people pushing the button. You might be naïve, or whatever when you are 20 years old, but what are you going to do when you are 81? You should know something. Authority figures shouldn’t be able to manipulate you when you are older than the authority figure.

So they began the test; some of them were high school graduates but most were college graduates or had their master’s degrees. There were also men and women in the testing. They ran the test, drew the straws, pushed the button, the tests were amazing; the levels went down because of the conservativeness of the new tests but they didn’t go down by much. Still after all of that training 67 percent of the men pushed the button to the point that it totally knocked the person to unconsciousness at 450 volts. They stopped them or they would have continued. But 73 percent of the women did, and, because I’m married I’m not saying another word. (This wasn’t in the statement but I added it.) I don’t think that it is that women are more cruel than men and boys, it’s hard for me to say that. But I think women still need to work on being able to say, “No,” and I think it’s important that we teach young women to say, “No,” more; but that’s not part of the sermon so I’m going to move forward.

Sixty-seven percent of men pushed the button and seventy-three percent of women pushed the button to the point where they were unconscious and in pain. What it showed, according to Professor Burger, was that obedience is something we live for and strive to obtain. It is important to recognize context. What they did then was move the person in authority further away and then out of the room, and then the teacher did not push the button quite as far. At one point they even tried to manipulate the test by putting someone else in the room to watch and they told them, “Oh, this person is going to be an authority figure in a later round, they just need to learn what the process is,” and that person would say, “Oh, I wouldn’t do that. Oh, that is terrible. How can we hurt this person?” to try and manipulate the teacher, so they would stop pushing the button. In almost every instance the teacher pushed the button in spite of someone else in the room judging them. That is how we are controlled by authority and need to believe that what we are told is right.

No wonder in Nazi Germany when an officer gave an enlisted person an order they did it even if it was so brutal. No wonder when they were singing, “Hosanna” on a Sunday when the religious authorities, when the Roman political authorities told them, “No, you need to holler, ‘Crucify,’” they did. It is imbedded in us to do what authority tells us. It takes a powerful amount of understanding to change the context to know which authority is appropriate and which one is wrong.

In first century Jesus should have been the authority: the son of God; the Messiah, the one who was to be resurrected. They had said it all the way. That is why they yelled

“Hosanna,” in the first place; and yet five days later he is crucified. Because they were trained to understand authorities – the ones who had military power and religious power - not power found in humility - like Jesus. Not a power in authority in a humble, caring, sacrificial Messiah.

It becomes harder and harder for us to retrain ourselves to accept an authority figure like Jesus. I wonder today - just like the test from the 1960s was just like the one in 2009 – if the results would be almost exactly the same. Would the results be the same if the Messiah came back in 2015? According to this test, we would crucify Jesus in the very same way. What do we have to do to question within ourselves how we view, and think, and respond, and look, at authority in such a way that we stop pushing the button...stop crucifying?

That is the challenge we are up against. That is the test in the condition that we are forced to look at. The only answer is that we have to teach our young ones and relearn, ourselves, how to evaluate what is real, what is the true definition of authority and power and what our Messiah is meant to be?

They wanted a Messiah of power and military might, and they killed a humble, loving Messiah. What Messiah do we want today? We have to answer that question before we push whatever button we are about to push again.

May God give us the wisdom and the glory to know the difference, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.