

# Beware of the Counsel of Gamaliel

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*And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God (Acts 5.38-39).*

SOME PEOPLE seem to think that Gamaliel was the only wise man in the whole of the Bible! Whenever wisdom is needed to assess the latest strange idea or movement to penetrate the churches, we hear the famous ‘counsel of Gamaliel’ quoted. We heard it often, for example, in connection with the ‘Toronto blessing’.

We hear it especially when there is no scriptural support for something. When the rest of the Bible seems to say ‘No!’ – then the counsel of Gamaliel comes to the rescue.

Gamaliel is often preferred above Paul. If the apostle clearly condemns something, his word is pushed aside in favour of Gamaliel’s. But Paul is not alone in this. Gamaliel is even wiser than the Lord Jesus Christ, in the estimation of some. Where Christ says, ‘Beware of false prophets,’ Gamaliel says, ‘Leave them be; just watch and wait. Say and do nothing. And if they survive and flourish, they will prove to be from God.’

## A liberal appeal

A famous historical appeal to the counsel of Gamaliel was made by a noted theological liberal in the USA named Harry Emerson Fosdick. In a sermon in 1922 (entitled, ‘Shall the Fundamentalists Win?’), Gamaliel is extolled as the personification of tolerance and magnanimity. Bible believers were urged to abandon their narrow and cantankerous unreasonableness and to adopt the great Gamaliel’s intellectual liberalism.

In recent decades, however, evangelicals too have been heard to press the counsel of Gamaliel as a reason for doing nothing about a range of trends, including contemporary music in worship, and charismatic excesses. The ministry of warning has been strangled and the people of God exposed to wild experimentation, all helped by the wisdom of Gamaliel.

Who, then, was Gamaliel? Was he a good and faithful and wise man? Did he speak from God? Is his celebrated counsel as wonderful as many seem to think?

Gamaliel was a leading Pharisee, a doctor of the law, and a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, who possessed great influence among the Jews between AD 20 and 58. He believed firmly that God’s favour was secured by virtue of being born a Jew, and by meticulous obedience to the ceremonial law. As a leading Pharisee, he would have been full of self-righteousness, and vehemently hostile to salvation by grace, through faith.

He was well aware of the teaching of John the Baptist that Christ was the Lamb of God, appointed to take away the sin of the world. He was also very familiar with the teaching of Christ, that neither Jewishness nor the ceremonial law could save the soul, and that individuals must repent and be born again by the power of God. These teachings he rejected. Indeed, he rejected the idea that Jesus Christ was any more than a man.

If Gamaliel had been affected by the ministry of Christ in the smallest degree, he was nevertheless among those who loved their position, and the esteem of men, far more than the praise of God. We must remember that he was one of those of whom Christ had said: ‘Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do.’

## Gamaliel’s intervention

It is true that when furious Jewish leaders were conferring about the execution of the apostles, Gamaliel intervened to save them. The older Protestant commentators, however, were not impressed.

How remarkable, they said, that God would use a proud man with foolish reasoning to blunt the fury of a murderous Sanhedrin. The old writers gave the glory to God, and no credit to Gamaliel.

Calvin expressed astonishment at the intellectual shallowness of Gamaliel, saying, 'His opinion is not what one might expect from a man of wisdom.' If Gamaliel had been right, observed Calvin, 'men must punish nobody and all crime must go uncorrected.'

Gamaliel's 'do-nothing' counsel would certainly bring to an end all law enforcement if adopted by any State. Equally, there would be no discipline in the church. God repeatedly commands in his Word that right conduct should be approved and wrongdoing should be restrained. The Sanhedrin had a duty to establish the truth (using the Scriptures) and act accordingly.

If the apostles were teaching correctly, they should have been supported and encouraged. If they were teaching falsehood, they should have been excluded from the Temple, and the people warned. Gamaliel and his colleagues should have sided either for or against the apostles. Gamaliel's counsel was a total abdication of responsibility. He said, in effect, 'Time will tell. In the meantime, it does not matter who they mislead.'

It must be admitted Gamaliel made two correct statements: first, that the work of men comes to nothing, and secondly, that the work of God cannot be overthrown. But he failed to note that the fall of the false may not take place for many centuries. Has Islam fallen yet, or Rome, or Hinduism? By Gamaliel's test, perhaps we should conclude that these movements are of God. But Gamaliel forgot that God does not judge the false immediately. Some false institutions will last until Christ destroys them at his coming.

### True only at final judgement

The counsel of Gamaliel is true only when set in the context of eternity and the final judgement. In the meantime we have a duty to exercise discernment by the clear guidance of the Word. To substitute the 'do-nothing' counsel of Gamaliel for discernment leads to one of two consequences, as we have noted. Either we fail to support something which is right, or we say and do nothing about something which is harmful and dishonouring to God. Gamaliel's counsel is always foolish, selfish, and hideously costly to the cause of Christ.

In the event, by doing nothing Gamaliel fought against God, because he failed to believe and support God's cause. He also failed to act when the apostles were flogged and charged not to speak in the name of the Lord.

Gamaliel's counsel of indecision was not due to his being a foolish man, for he was a renowned scholar and thinker. His reasoning was the product of unbelief and of fear. He was afraid of the reaction of the crowds in Jerusalem.

The other members of that hastily convened Jewish Council imagined that they possessed the social standing and moral authority to get away with whatever their murderous instincts dictated. Gamaliel knew better, realising that the death of the apostles could put the Council itself at risk. So he warned, 'Take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do.'

The Temple police sent to arrest the apostles had not dared to use violence – 'for they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned' (verse 26). Even many unsaved people sympathised with the apostles on account of their power to heal.

History repeats itself. Just as self-preservation and self-interest was the motive behind Gamaliel's original counsel, so it is often the reason for its use today. Years ago the 'Toronto blessing' would arrive in a town where a weak and indecisive pastor led a fellowship of the Lord's people. 'If I oppose this,' he would reason, 'I may lose members in my church. Worse, the advocates of this new phenomenon may push me aside. On the other hand, if I encourage this new phenomenon too openly and too early, I will certainly meet with disapproval from my members.'

## A Pharisee to the rescue

How will this unprotecting pastor handle such a dilemma? He will not find a text presenting the words of Christ, or of any apostle to justify an ambivalent, compromising, equivocal position. But, fortunately for the unworthy pastor, the words of a proud, self-righteous, unconverted Pharisee will come to his rescue. The counsel of Gamaliel is available for any pastor or elder interested only in self-preservation, and peace at any price.

Who are these who appeal so much to the counsel of Gamaliel? They are like him. They do not want the counsel of God, but a safe, easy and congenial solution. With the entire Bible open before them, nothing is of any value except for the words of an unregenerate Pharisee.

Gamaliel, to support his plea to do nothing, mentioned the cases of two rebel leaders who had been killed (apparently by the Roman authorities), with the result that their influence soon waned. The obvious implication was that Jesus of Nazareth had also been put to death by the Romans, and his following would doubtless die out in the same way. Gamaliel further warned that if the movement was from God, to kill the disciples would be to fight against him.

## Don't interfere!

So Gamaliel employed two arguments. Number One: If God is not behind the disciples, they will disperse without our interference. Number Two: If God is behind them, we will be guilty of fighting him. How frequently these arguments are heard today! If God is not behind the gimmicks, the worldliness, and the hysterical and occult practices coming into present-day Christianity, they will die out in time. Therefore, forget all pastoral responsibility and let them be.

On the other hand, if you speak against them, you may find you are quenching and blaspheming the work of the Spirit of the living God. Therefore keep off! Don't interfere! Stand on the touchline. See which way the wind blows. Do whatever is most advantageous and favourable to yourself, and see how matters unfold.

## A test of pastors

The most useful purpose of the counsel of Gamaliel to present-day believers, is that it serves as an indication of the depth and reliability of those who function as pastors, leaders and Bible teachers. The use of the counsel of Gamaliel in defence of a 'do-nothing' or 'run-with-the-tide' approach to any new fad, is a sure sign of a person who has an inadequate respect for Scripture as the authoritative judge of all matters of faith.

In other words, the counsel of Gamaliel may tell you much more about a pastor, than about how you should respond to the latest spiritual threats.

It is only to be expected that Gamaliel should be held in high regard by today's Bible commentators. If the present array of ecumenical new-evangelicals can endorse the pope, then why not Gamaliel? What is the difference? Both stand tenaciously for works as the basis of salvation, and both reject biblical, evangelical grace. Both uphold a mediatorial priesthood imagined to be vested in themselves, and both reject the simplicity which is in Christ. The similarities could be continued at length. Just as the pope is now widely accepted as a true man of faith, so Gamaliel, a Christ-rejecting, proud Pharisee, is regarded as a saintly protector of the apostles. (He is 'Saint Gamaliel' to Roman Catholics!) Fellow believers — be warned, and beware of the counsel of Gamaliel!