

Gamaliel
Acts 5:33-41

Introduction

One of the interesting aspects of Acts is the sidelights on notable men, non Christian people who were of great eminence. We often know of them through their writings or the writings of others – Jewish, Roman or Greek. One of these is Gamaliel. His timely intervention saved Peter and John from lynching.

Gamaliel was one of the outstanding scholars of the day. He was a professor of theology, the greatest teacher around at that time. One of his pupils was Saul of Tarsus (later Paul the Apostle). Gamaliel was honoured by a special title. He was called “Rabban”, one of only seven Jewish scholars so called. Most were called “Rabbi”, which means “my teacher”, but “Rabban” means “our teacher”. This was a tribute to his eminent learning and revered character.

There were two schools of thought in orthodox Jewry, the conservative school of Shammai, and the liberal school of Hellel. An example of the difference – the school of Shammai held that adultery was the only ground of divorce, while the school of Hellel permitted adultery for any trifling reason – burning the food, raising their voice, speaking against their in-laws, not being beautiful enough. The Hellel school of thought was much more popular among some Jewish men!

Gamaliel was a man of broad sympathies. He was not “tight”. He was a kindly man. He encouraged his pupils to study Greek authors – which horrified strict Jews. Did he encourage Paul in this way? (Acts 17:28, 1 Corinthians 15:33, Titus 1:12 suggest a knowledge of Oratus, Cleanthis and Epimenides). Gamaliel was so highly revered, he was called “The Beauty of the Law”. He was not only revered, but loved too. After his death it was written, “Since Rabban Gamaliel the elder died, there has been no more reverence for the Law, and purity and abstinence died out at the same time.” He died in 52AD, about the time of Paul’s shipwreck in Malta. He was buried with great honour. His funeral pile was of rich materials, never known before except at the funeral of a king.

Gamaliel played an important part in saving the apostles from an untimely death. The Sadducees priestly party was worldly, compromisers with Rome, incensed by the refusal of the Apostles to stop preaching and their insistence that Christ was alive. They were furious and wanted the Apostles to be put to death. But Gamaliel warned against such a course. He was a Pharisee. There were 6000 Pharisees, middle class laymen, devoted to the law. They hated Jesus, but were more sympathetic than the Sadducees with the Gospel, e.g. views on life after death. There were some decent Pharisees, notably Nicodemus. Some were converted and became Christians.

Just when the Apostles were in danger of death, help came from this unexpected source. Gamaliel made a simple common sense speech. He needed to be careful. There had been trouble before. Theudis was one who set himself up. He had 400 followers, but when Theudis was killed, his followers dispersed. Then there was Judas

who led a revolt, and was also killed, and his followers dispersed. It might have seemed wiser to leave well alone.

Instead, Gamaliel makes the point that if the cause was of men, i.e. of human origin, it would fail like the rest, and would die out. But if the cause came from God, they would not succeed in trying to put it out. They would be fighting against God, and wasting their time. So his plea was for caution. Wait and see. Take time for heads to cool.

This was good common sense, down to earth reasoning, appealing to the man of the world. He was talking sense, and in the providence of God, he saved the day. The Sadducees were held back from their murderous plans. The Apostles were flogged, cautioned, and let go, instead of being stoned.

Gamaliel had often had good press. Indeed some have wondered if he was not really a Christian. Yet below the surface he made three big mistakes, because his was basically a worldly common sense approach. It did the trick, for he was dealing with worldly men, who accepted worldly advice. But at a deeper level, from the Christian viewpoint, there were three mistakes.

False comparison

Gamaliel spoke of Theudas and Judas. We know nothing of Theudas, though at a later time there was a magician called Theudas (it was a common name) whose predictions ended up in his defeat, and his head being brought to Jerusalem, one of many revolts in the first century. Judas, in 6AD, led a revolt when the Romans ordered a census to assess taxes, and he was soon overthrown. These men were obviously political extremists, and by making the comparison between Christ and these men, Gamaliel was suggesting that He was just another revolutionary and agitator.

This is the classic way scholars like Gamaliel have, down the ages, tried to evade the challenge of Christ. They put Him into the same pigeon-hole as others who have failed, presenting Him as just another reformer or another philosopher. They claim to have heard it all before, for there is nothing new under the sun, and it can safely be ignored.

Gamaliel's words may have done the trick, but they were made by an uncommitted sympathiser, for whom there were too many risks to become a Christian, for whom it was safer to be on the sidelines as an onlooker and observer, an agnostic fence-sitter.

It is the same today. Jesus is presented as just another great religious reformer, or a great religious teacher. Some say all the world religions – Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism – were all pioneered by religious geniuses, sharing their thoughts about God and life and the future, all teaching men how to strive to reach God and how to live to win salvation. The Western world may be dominated by Christianity, but some will argue that is just the western world's way of expressing this great quest.

Let's be clear. Jesus Christ was not just a great religious leader. He is God, who has become man. **In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form** (Colossians

2:9). He did not come to show us how to earn salvation. He came to die on the Cross so that men might have the free gift of Salvation. He was not just a figure in the past, but He is our contemporary, known, trusted, loved, obeyed, with power to save, forgive and change. He is going to return at the climax of history, to inaugurate eternal state of affairs, hold final judgement of all men, to usher in the new heaven and new earth. Not Jesus the good, or Jesus the best, but Jesus the only, the unique, the incomparable, the Lord of all.

Gamaliel's comparison and all modern comparisons are quite misleading and false. They are based on a misunderstanding and fatal underestimation of Christ and His person and meaning and uniqueness.

False Principle

Gamaliel declared that if it was of human origin it would fail, and if it was from God it must succeed. Sounds very enlightened and spiritual. Everything is to be judged by success. It may be a good guide in business or commerce, but not when we come to moral and spiritual issues. Worldly standards of success are no test of the truth.

God's success stories may appear to be failures to the world. Abraham left wealthy Ur to become a nomad in the desert. Moses gave up Pharaoh's palaces with all wealth and prestige to share affliction with a band of escaped slaves in the wilderness, with much misery and problems. Jeremiah was a total failure by worldly standards of success, ridiculed, rejected and thrown into a pit. He was so miserable he told God He had let him down and deceived him. He cursed the day he was born. Nehemiah gave up a well-paid job in civil service to build a wall around a ruin.

The fact of the matter is that the wicked often prosper and succeed, and the godly suffer and have the hardest of times. Visible success is no proof of God's favour. Visible failure is no proof of God's disfavour. Only when you bring in the spiritual and eternal dimension – invisible to the human eye – do you see true success which is proof of God's approval and blessing. And true failure of those who rebel.

In Psalm 73 the Psalmist is so frustrated as he sees the prosperity of the wicked, their healthy bodies, lack of problems in life, proud and violent, boasting and bragging and sneering at God, increasing their wealth daily. The Psalmist had tried to be God-fearing, he had prayed every day of his life, and yet his life was misery. By human standards, the wicked were right every time. Then everything changed when the Psalmist looked from a spiritual point of view and eternal dimension. He went into the sanctuary and thought about the wicked's final destiny.

When we take the short term view, measure things from a material point of view and outward success, see things as men see them, then we see no sign of God's approval. Only when we look at things from a spiritual eternal point of view, considering heaven and hell, only then we see the real proof of God's power and approval. In the short run, evil does succeed and so do evil men. And any good seems to fail. But in the long run, what is from God does succeed, is worthwhile, revealing divine triumph.

Do not be discouraged.

“When you look at others with land and gold,

Think Christ has promised you his wealth untold”

*“Dare to do right, dare to be true,
Keep the great judgement seat always on view.”*

Life is not fair or just. Gamaliel’s standards were wrong if we take them up. They do not ring true. Things will not be right until eternity.

False Conclusion

Therefore in the present case, I advise you: leave these men alone (Acts 5:38). Not because of sympathy, or because they should let the Romans deal with them, but because they should not commit themselves. Leave well alone – it’s the safe compromise. Nail your colours to the fence, and not the mast. Don’t get involved.

Gamaliel had plenty of evidence that these men were no ordinary men and that the Gospel was no ordinary message. Plenty of people had seen and heard Christ. People had been miraculously healed, who could be examined. Gamaliel knew full well the prophecies of the Old Testament that had been fulfilled here. There was evidence for the Resurrection, and the evidence of the changed lives because of the Holy Spirit coming on the disciples at Pentecost. But this was all quietly dismissed. In practice, the evidence was considered as lies. The body of evidence was ignored. It was better not to be committed, to stay open minded.

But one thing you cannot do if you are intelligent and responsible is be indifferent. If Christ is the Son of God, if He died for sin, and is alive for evermore, this demands a verdict. The evidence needs to be examined, honestly and fairly as if life depended on it. Either this is the most important thing that ever happened in the history of the world, or the most outrageous lie. Cannot be non-committed. To be open-minded about Christ is like being open-minded about whether your house is on fire. A verdict is required. The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintained neutrality.

Jesus refused to accept a neutral verdict. **He who is not for me is against me** (Luke 11:23). We either accept Him or we do not. There is nothing between. Neutrality is opposition. Not to choose Him is to reject Him. Many today are sympathetic. They would like to be Christians but they do not want to commit themselves. They think being open minded is a virtue – they avoid the force of the evidence and force of challenge. Whether a silent sympathiser or an indecisive agnostic, they abdicate responsibility for life and eternal destination. Better to be like Peter and John, with bleeding backs, than the uncommitted Gamaliel, a coward at heart.