

Eternity Daily Bible Study - No. 371
Series: The Primal Church - Acts Chapters 1-8
Verses: Acts 5:34-42
Topic: The Wise Counsel Of Gamaliel
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Acts 5:34-42 MKJV Then there stood up one in the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a doctor of the Law honored among all the people. And he commanded the apostles to be put outside a little space. (35) And he said to them, Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. (36) For before these days Theudas rose up, boasting himself to be somebody; a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves to him; who was slain. And all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered and brought to nothing. (37) After this one, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the Registration, and drew away considerable people after him. Yet that one perished; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered. (38) And now I say to you, Withdraw from these men and let them alone. For if this counsel or this work is of men, it will come to nothing. (39) But if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it, lest perhaps you be found even to fight against God. (40) And they obeyed him. And calling the apostles, beating them, they commanded not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. (41) Then indeed they departed from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be shamed for His name. (42) And every day in the temple, and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching the gospel: Jesus Christ.

Gamaliel is a fascinating character: Gamaliel came from an impeccable lineage - a Pharisee of Pharisees he was the grand-son of Hillel, one of the main expounders of the Jewish Law and a strict Pharisee. Gamaliel's father was Rabban Simeon (Rabban is a very high title, even higher than Rabbi). This Rabban Simeon may have been the devout Simeon that blessed the infant Jesus in the Temple. Gamaliel himself was also one of the Misnic doctors, the 35th since the giving of the Law. Gamaliel taught the Apostle Paul, and there is a legend that Gamaliel too became a Christian at some point (though this has not been confirmed). Gamaliel became president of the Sanhedrin and it was said: "when he died, (in AD 52) the glory of the law ceased, and purity and pharisaism died;" (the above information is a condensation of information in the ISBE and Gill's Commentary).

Since Gamaliel would have been good friends with both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea and presumably his former pupil – Paul would also have prayed for his conversion, I'd like to think that the legend of the salvation of this noble man was true! Gamaliel was certainly close to the line in his speech here when he recognized the work of God :

“And now I say to you, Withdraw from these men and let them alone. For if this counsel or this work is of men, it will come to nothing. (39) But if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it, lest perhaps you be found even to fight against God.”

Now this is excellent advice when dealing with a revival. Some revivals are false – if so they will fizzle; but if a revival is of God, then we can be found to be “fighting against God” if we criticize it. The things to look for are genuine repentance and conversion and the fruits of faith, holy living and godly wisdom. Odd manifestations sometimes occur in the spiritual atmosphere that surrounds revivals and especially as Satan tries to distract, deceive and disrupt the work of God. Such manifestations neither authenticate the revival nor do they make it unholy. They “just happen” and should not be sought. Only God in Christ and His work in us should be sought.

Sometimes wrong doctrine is preached. If inadvertently, out of ignorance, then the preacher should be gently corrected. If deliberately, then stern rebuke is in order. Few revivals are led by theologians – the New England revival of Jonathan Edwards being the exception rather than the rule. Theology can be really messy at the outset of a revival. However if the preachers are humble and teachable in this regard and the fruit of changed lives is present then the signs are good for the future.

God is orderly but He is seldom neat and tidy. He does not plant his trees all in a row or make square continents. There is a certain fractal looseness, a higher geometry with God. In line with this the Holy Spirit seldom follows neat social expectations. Jesus broke many of the social rules of the day – for instance in talking to the woman, who was a Samaritan, who also had a checkered sexual history. Indeed few preachers even today would dare open up such a conversation.

The Holy Spirit often offends the social and ecclesiastical order of the day – and certainly did so in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus. This is not to say that upsetting people is a good thing! But it is to say that we should not quench the Holy Spirit simply because God is working outside our “cultural box”. After all, His “cultural box” is much larger than ours!

The apostles are beaten, quite unjustly, but do not rush to get a lawyer! Instead their reaction is a mature one: “Then indeed they departed from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be shamed for His name. (42) And every day in the temple, and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching the gospel: Jesus Christ.”

The apostles did not give in to the “fight or flight” reaction. On the “fight” side they did not get a lawyer or start a riot – though they could have done so. On the “flight” side they did not stop preaching the gospel, either in the temple or from house to house. They stood firm, kept on going and showed a mature mastery of the situation. They were not silenced, nor were they provoked into foolish over-reaction.

Some recent commentators have noted that the phrase “and from house to house” probably means “from house fellowship to house fellowship” as in “the church that meets in their house”. (1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, Philemon 1:2). About half the time the word “house” is used in the New Testament it means “church fellowship”. For instance: Titus 1:11 – “whose mouth you must stop, who subvert whole houses, teaching things not right for the sake of ill gain.” During the NT era, especially during times of persecution, the church tended to meet in the homes of the wealthier believers – such as Lydia, Philemon and businessmen such as Aquila

and Priscilla. Though there were a few church buildings they did not come along (as a normal way of doing church) until much later.

There is plenty of evidence that God seems to bless both ways of being church (buildings and house churches). However house churches are better when there is persecution or when funds are limited or when there is an urgent need to share the gospel quickly in an area. Church buildings seem to be better when a strong institutional presence in the community is required.

Let us show grace to the many wonderful movements that God raises up.

Blessings,

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