

## Gamaliel's Folly

The New Testament portrays Gamaliel as perhaps a prudent and pragmatic man, if not a wise one. He was the grandson of Hillel "the elder" (one of the most revered legal scholars in Judaism of the first century B.C.), and in the eyes of the Jewish people, followed in his grandfather's hallowed footsteps. The Talmud somewhat famously records of him, "When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died," said the Jews, "the glory of the Law ceased and purity and abstinence died," (W.W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*; Vol.1, p.426). Gamaliel was one of only seven to whom the title "Rabban" (supreme teacher) was given. This lauded praise notwithstanding, Gamaliel wasn't as wise as some might assume. Consider, first, some background from Acts 5:17-42 leading to our introduction to this esteemed leader of Israel:

- The apostles had been jailed (due to jealousy over their *successes* with and favorable regard of the people) by the High Priest and the Sadducees, vv.17-18;
- The *angel of the Lord* had subsequently released them from prison, and commanded, "*Go your way, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this life,*" vv.19-20;
- They fully complied, v.21a;
- But when the Jewish leaders sent for the apostles to be brought from the jail, and it was reported that they were not there but had been seen in the temple "*teaching the people,*" they were rearrested and brought before the Council, vv.21b-27a;
- After hearing the apostles' defense of their actions and the primary tenets of the gospel (vv.29-32), the Council was "*cut to the quick*" and "*were intending to slay them,*" v.33.

This is the point at which Gamaliel, "*a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people,*" stood up and calmed the situation. He had the apostles removed, v.34b, and then addressed the Council...

- He first urged caution regarding the Council's intention to kill the apostles, v.35;
- Next, he provided two examples from Israel's past in which what were surely viewed as *insurrectionists* had arisen and aroused a following among the people. In both cases, he reasoned, the leaders were *slain* and the movements subsequently "*dispersed and came to nothing,*" vv.36-37;
- He then advised "*in the present case*"- meaning Jesus whom they had already *slain/crucified*, cf. vv.28,30, and His *apostles* whom they similarly proposed to *slay*, cf. v.33, that the Council should "*stay away from these men and let them alone,*" v.38a;
- His reasoning seems sound- that if this *work* (the proclamation of Christ and resultant Christianity) was the mere product of men, it would soon likewise perish, v.38; but that if *it was "of God,"* they would not be able to *overthrow it*, and even worse, would find themselves in the unenviable position of "*fighting against God,*" v.39.

On the surface, this sounds like wise counsel, and the Council "*took his advice,*" v.40a.... sort of, v.40b. But consider some fatal flies in the ointment of Gamaliel's reasoning:

1. While the largely Sadducean Council that he addressed did *not* believe in *resurrection*, cf. Acts 23:8a- and thus their past efforts to *slay* insurrectionist leaders

made some sense, Gamaliel, as Pharisee, *did* believe in resurrection, cf. Acts 23:8b. Thus, killing the leader of a movement that was “of God” and who’s adherents proclaimed that “*The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you put to death by hanging Him on a cross*” (v.30) is at best disingenuous and at worst hypocritical. As a Pharisee who believed in resurrection, Gamaliel’s advice shouldn’t have been “*let them alone,*” but instead “let’s investigate further” or “join them!”

2. Gamaliel also, and very *unwisely*, equated the “movements” of *false Christ’s* with that of the true Messiah. As a man looked to as a “*teacher of the Law,*” he surely should have recognized and pointed out the decided lack of fulfilled prophecy regarding *Theudas* and *Judas of Galilee*, and thus identified them as imposters for it. But with his credentials, he, of all people, should have also recognized how “*Jesus of Nazareth*” fulfilled each and every one of the prophecies regarding the Messiah and, along with John the Baptist, should have been declaring, “*Behold, the Lamb of God!*” to everyone (cf. John 1:36; cp. Matthew 11:4-6 and Isaiah 35:5ff; 61:1).
3. And finally, Gamaliel took the very *unwise* tact of equating “success” as defined by men with “success” as defined by God. He apparently viewed the *death* of the leader and *scattering* of followers as an indication of falsehood and failure. But Jesus was *crucified*, v.30, and His followers were *scattered*, cf. Matthew 26:56 and Acts 8:1; 11:19. However, Jehovah God used these very events to bring about salvation and spread its “good news” to “*the remotest part of the earth,*” cf. vv.31-32 and 1:8!

Who knows what might have happened in Jerusalem and for the Jewish people of that time to the present **if** Gamaliel had only been *wise* enough discern the signs of fulfilled prophecy regarding the Messiah (cf. Matthew 16:1-4; 11:5-6), and bold enough to stand on his own Pharisaic convictions regarding Jesus the Christ’s resurrection of the dead? Gamaliel and his advice to the Council may have prudently pragmatic in some senses, but neither he nor it surely was truly wise! (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at [southportcofc.org](http://southportcofc.org); email to [mrpcstrong@hotmail.com](mailto:mrpcstrong@hotmail.com))