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Was Gamaliel's Counsel to the Sanhedrin Based on Sound Reasoning?

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n. Chr.), der das Religionsbuch, den Koran, auf Grund vorgeblicher göttlicher Offenbarungen geschrieben hat. Die ganze mohammedanische Religion läßt sich zusammenfassen in den herausfordernden Ruf: „Es ist kein Gott außer Allah, und Mohammed ist sein Prophet." Der Mohammedanismus verwirft den dreieinigen Gott mit großer Entschiedenheit und räumt Christo höchstens die Stelle eines hervorragenden Propheten ein. Die fünf großen Vorschriften der mohammedanischen Religion sind: 1. Die Wiederholung des obengenannten Bekenntnisses. 2. Die Gebetsübung. 3. Der Monat Ramadan als Fastenmonat. 4. Almosengeben. 5. Die Pilgerreise nach Mekka. Es finden sich im Koran nicht weniger als 99 Namen für Allah, und die stete Wiederholung der Formel „Im Namen des barmherzigen und mitleidsvollen Gottes" ist fast ermüdend. Der Bote der Offenbarung Gottes an Mohammed ist der Erzengel Gabriel, und das System gibt den Engeln eine sehr prominente Stellung, so daß durch die massenhaften Engel, Geister oder Djinns die meisten Mohammedaner praktisch und faktisch der Vielgötterei ergeben sind. Selbstverständlich will der Mohammedanismus nichts zu tun haben mit einer Erlösung durch Christi Blut, und die ganze Geschichte des Islam (Unterwerfung unter Gott) zeigt, daß er durch und durch eine Werkreligion ist, die obendrein auf einer ziemlich niedrigen Stufe steht, so daß von wirklichem moralischem Wert kaum die Rede sein kann. P. E. Kretzmann

Was Gamaliel's Counsel to the Sanhedrin Based on Sound Reasoning?

According to Acts 5:38, 39, Gamaliel advised the Sanhedrin not to take hasty action with reference to the testimony of the apostles and the "Christian movement" but to exercise prudence and to wait. His reason for giving this advice he set forth in the following words: "For if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to naught; but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it, lest haply ye be found to fight against God." We ask: "Is the reason given by Gamaliel correct? Does it accord with known facts?"

Before proceeding to our task of answering this question, it will be advisable to state what interpretation we place upon the expression: "If this . . . be of men." We take this to mean, first, if it is something of purely human origin, the result of mere human ingenuity or wisdom, something that has no reference to a word, command, or promise of God, and which is conceived and done with purely human and temporal ends in view; secondly, something that is *contrary* to God's word or command, or that has

the purpose of frustrating the Lord's promises, something that is conceived in, and motivated by, hostility to God, His Word, or His Church. Such human counsels and works will terminate on the Judgment Day. The *effect* of the second kind of counsels or works will continue beyond the Judgment Day only in the *punishment* which they will bring upon their authors. The expression "if it be of God" is clear by contrast.[1)]

In the light of this definition we ask: Does every counsel or work, testimony or undertaking, which has no higher authority than that of men always prove to be short-lived and come to naught; and does that which has divine authorship or sanction always succeed or endure?

Our answer will be "Yes" if we are to think of *the ultimate issue* of things, if we are to bear in mind God's final judgment. For it is certain that at the end of the world we shall witness the fulfilment of the Lord's words recorded in Matt. 15:13: "Every plant which My heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up." Then, as St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 3:13, "every man's work shall be made manifest"; its character will stand fully revealed. If it is "of men," it will perish; but if it is "of God," it will endure.

But we can find no indication in Gamaliel's words that he had this final issue of God's Judgment in mind; and we might add that, so far as our observation goes, most people who appeal to Gamaliel's reasoning have no thought of that. Gamaliel evidently desired to give the impression that his words expressed the conclusion which he had reached after considering the *temporal* and *visible* results of past events. He cites two events of past Jewish history and intimates that his advice is given on the strength of the lesson taught by these. The lesson is that whatever is of mere human device or origin fails in this world while that which is "of God" succeeds and endures. Yes, his admonition to the Sanhedrists that they *wait to see the outcome* of the testimony of the apostles and of the movement led by them carries with it the definite suggestion that mere human counsels and works are *of short duration.*

When we look at Gamaliel's reasoning in this light, we immediately see its fallacy. Indeed, if these words had not been uttered at so solemn and critical a moment in the history of the

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1) If it be asked in what sense Gamaliel used the expression "if this . . . be of men," in the sense of the first or the second definition, it might be said that he probably had both meanings in mind. Of course there is the possibility that he shared what seems to have been the view of his fellow-councilmen, that the apostles, in preaching without the permission of the rulers, were acting contrary to properly constituted authority (cf. Acts 4:7) and therefore in a manner which made them guilty of sinning against divine arrangement.

Lord's Church, or if they had been spoken by a man of lesser standing and poorer intelligence than Gamaliel's, we should be strongly inclined to dismiss them with the judgment that their author had been guilty of faulty generalization, that he had not assembled sufficient data on which to base a sound conclusion; that, while many things which are "of men" do come to naught after a short time, others show great tenacity and long duration. But we are disposed to shield Gamaliel from the full force of the criticism and dissent which his expressed principle of judgment arouses in us.

Why are we disposed to shield him at this point? In the first place, because there is the possibility that he was, to some extent, affected by the apostles' testimony concerning our Savior's resurrection in fulfilment of divine prophecy and by their declaration that this resurrection revealed the rulers to be men who were indeed fighting against God. In other words, it is possible that he was prompted to speak as he did by an uneasy conscience, which urged him to say something that would be calculated to gain time, to prevent action which might encompass their doom.[2] In such a situation many another has uttered half truths, specious arguments, elaborate though fallacious reasoning.

In the second place, we are inclined to be lenient in our judgment of Gamaliel's reasoning because we cannot help thinking that the Lord was employing him as His instrument to ward off disaster from His newly founded Church, which still needed the courageous personal and written testimony of the apostles for its growth and development. He was the kind of man who could be used in the exigency which had arisen. He enjoyed prestige, authority, and a reputation for calm and just reasoning. With these advantages he was in a position to calm the fanatical zeal of the bitter and hostile spirits of the council; and since he, though he may have been conscience-stricken, was not willing "to go all the way" with the Lord and His cause, was not willing to embrace His Gospel and defend His apostles, *the Lord made him go at least far enough to serve His great eternal purposes.*[3]

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2) This possibility evidently prompted Stier to write as follows in his *Discourses of the Apostles:* "Gamaliel's opinion as expressed in that council of ungodly men will always possess a highly significant character; it may be regarded as the representative of the conscience of the Sanhedrin, or of that voice which bears witness in every one of God and which prompts the reason even of such men to cry aloud: 'Take heed!'" — Quoted in *The Acts of the Apostles* in Lange's *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures,* Schaff's translation, 1869, p. 101.

3) In offering this exposition we are not unmindful of the ancient Christian tradition that Gamaliel was secretly a Christian and that he, together with his son Abib and with Nicodemus, was baptized by Peter and John. Our exposition takes no account of this tradition because,

But let the motives back of Gamaliel's remark be what they may; if we ask ourselves whether the *reason* which he assigns for prudence is correct, our answer must be "No." History certainly does not confirm his assertion. The pages of sacred as well as secular history furnish abundant evidence of its fallacy. Let us glance at a few examples.

The Lord selected the Israelites to be His people. As a chosen vine of His, He planted them in a favored land. *God's counsel was the moving factor in the founding of the Israelite nation.* The Lord was certainly sincere in His expressed desire that the Israelites remain His people and that they remain in possession of the land which He had given them. If evidence of the Lord's sincerity of purpose be demanded of us, we need but point to the fact that He sent one inspired prophet after another to keep the Israelites true to His covenant. *God's purpose and work made Israel great and favored.* — But look at Israel today! Its covenant relation to God is a thing of past history. There are Jews today who still try to cling to the shadow of the past, but the substance is gone! And with this covenant relation went Israel's status as a nation; yes, and with it went Israel's claim to Canaan as its homeland.

Similar examples are furnished in the pages of the history of the Christian Church. Many congregations established by the apostles and by the Christians during the postapostolic period have long since vanished. The only evidences of their former existence and early flourishing condition which we have, outside of the pages of church history, are often to be found only in archeological museums or in the remains of excavated sites. The establishment of these early churches was surely a work of God; yet the churches have disappeared.

When we approach secular history, we find it necessary to reverse our procedure and to search for evidence to show that movements and institutions which very evidently did not have God as their author have nevertheless been marked by what men usually call success and have had a prolonged history. This reversal of technique is made necessary by the fact that we

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in the first place, it seems to rest on "a conjecture suggested by the present text"; in the second place, because "it is by no means sustained by the opinion which Gamaliel expresses in vv. 35—39." (See Lange-Schaff, p. 97.) The last paragraph of this article will be seen to have a direct bearing on this second reason. In the third place, Paul, when defending himself before the people in Jerusalem, years later, made no mention of Gamaliel's conversion. If the tradition were based upon fact, we should feel that Paul would have mentioned it in order to impress upon the frenzied Jews that other highly respected Pharisees before him had embraced the Gospel and that therefore they ought to stop and think before doing him violence. Cf. Acts 22:3.

short-sighted mortals are unable to state whether this or that human institution or work was willed by the Lord.

Let us take Buddhism as our first example. From history we learn that this was founded in Northern India as early as the sixth century before Christ. (For a description of Buddhism see *Concordia Cyclopedia*, art. "Buddhism," p. 99.) This movement had what many people would call tremendous success. It "spread to practically all India and to Ceylon. It reached Tibet and China about the beginning of our era and spread from China to Korea and Japan. Still later it spread to Burma and Siam," *Conc. Cyc.*, p. 100. It is true that in some of these countries Buddhism is no longer in its original form and that in others it has yielded very largely to Hinduism and to Mohammedanism; but the number of its adherents is still very great, over a hundred million. *It is verily the tragic irony of history that such a vast number of men should be dwelling in spiritual darkness and yet should call themselves followers of the "Enlightened One," Buddha.* We ask: Does the tremendous spread of Buddhism and its long history prove its divine origin?

As our second example we shall take Mohammedanism, to which we have already referred. During the century following the Hegira in 622, Mohammedanism conquered Persia, Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and Spain. It was prevented from overrunning Europe by the decisive battle of Tours in 732. This fanatical religion holds millions in its thralls today.

Let us take as our final example the Papacy, the records of which fill the pages of both secular and Church History. Think of how this human institution corrupted primitive Christianity and pure doctrine; think of its blasphemous pretensions, and then of its immense spread, its vast power, its effects on the history of all the nations of the civilized world, of its long history, and its present vitality. Shall we say that its phenomenal "success" and its long duration prove its divine origin?

Possibly some one may say: But *haven't many humanly conceived counsels and works come to naught* during the centuries since Gamaliel uttered his famous words? We must certainly answer: No doubt they have. Many a false prophet has arisen and vanished; many social institutions and customs of the past are now of interest only to the antiquarian; many a revolution effected only a temporary change in human society. To offset that fact, however, is this, that *many noble works undertaken in obedience to the Lord's word and many noble fruits of the Spirit have languished and died.* How many budding Christian lives have not been blighted by later unbelief or by sin and vice? How many homes that were founded with Christ as the

invisible Guest of Honor have not later become abodes of selfishness, of worldly care, of pleasure-seeking? How many Christian congregations have not been torn asunder by bitterness and strife? How many Christian schools have not broken away from their ancient religious moorings and become active purveyors of Modernism, rationalism, atheism? Finally, does not current as well as past history reveal to us the spectacle of nations within whose boundaries the Christian religion once exerted a wide influence and whose people and institutions strongly felt the impact of the teachings and the spirit of the Gospel subverting the Christian religion or achieving what seems to be considerable success in suppressing it?

History, then, cannot be invoked to furnish proof either for the assertion that things of purely human origin quickly come to naught or for the claim that what is of God necessarily prospers and endures in this world.

Does it seem anomalous that this should be so? Can God's works ever fail? Can any works of men last longer than some of God's? If so, are we not faced with a mystery? *Yes, the mystery of sin!* The mystery of rational creatures, originally created with freedom of moral choice and action, sinning against their gracious and glorious Lord, and *then pursuing their own sinful and wilful course in this world,* resisting the Lord's Spirit, fighting against His Word, seeking to destroy His Church and His influence. Psalm 2 describes this sinful madness in striking terms: "Why do the heathen rage and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, 'Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.'" We know that ultimately the works of sin and the counsels of the ungodly will fail. Ultimately "He that sitteth in the heavens . . . shall have them in derision"; on the Last Day "He will speak unto them in His wrath and vex them in His sore displeasure." Yes, often the Lord confounds the counsels of men, dashes their works in pieces like a potter's vessel, breaks His enemies with a rod of iron, *already in this world.* **For His eternal purposes cannot fail!** But beyond this we must concede that while time lasts and sin endures, while Satan is permitted to exercise power as ruler in the darkness of this world, we shall often have to lament the fact that many *gracious* purposes of God are brought to naught so far as we short-sighted mortals can see, while many sinful designs of men bear fruit.[4]

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4) What has here been said about man's ability to resist God in matters pertaining to His gracious will with regard to men, but about his inability to resist God in matters pertaining to His eternal purposes,

By what principles, then, are we to be governed when we are confronted with the necessity of judging whether a counsel or work, a movement or an institution, is of divine or human character?

The first principle is surely this: If a counsel or work is anchored in the Word of God, if it is stated, taught, or commanded therein, we must accept and confess it; and we must assume the consequences of such acceptance and confession, even though these include suffering, hardship, persecution. Our attitude in this case must be that of the apostles, who in the presence of prudent Gamaliel and his fanatical associates said, "We ought to obey God rather than men," and, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard," 5:29; 4:20. This attitude ultimately meant death to the apostles, just as it did later to the Christian martyrs; but they died with the praise of God on their lips and His heavenly comfort in their hearts and left us a noble example to follow.

This conviction moved Luther to raise his voice against the anti-Scriptural doctrines and practises of the Papacy, even though these were hoary with age. It gave him the courage to say in the presence of the Emperor and the Pope's legate: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise!" — Again, this conviction causes the Church to start new missions wherever and whenever a favorable opportunity presents itself and to put men and money to work in these missions; and earnest Christians, when asked to support them, do not wait for glowing reports of success before heeding the plea; they do not say, with prudent Gamaliel, "Let us see first whether this is God-willed or not." They give *without delay,* in cheerful obedience to the Savior's will and in love to their fellow-redeemed, knowing full well that the real results of the mission-work will not be seen until after time has ceased to exist.

The second principle is this: If something is not prescribed or taught in God's Word, but is not contrary to it either, and we are *convinced* that it is good, we should give it that measure and form of support which circumstances seem to call for. Thus a democratic form of government is an adiaphoron. Yet we think it is an excellent thing; we proclaim our belief that it is; and

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reminds us of course of Luther's dictum: "When God works through means, He can be resisted; but when He works without means, in His revealed glory *(in nuda maiestate),* He cannot be resisted." It reminds us also of the classical illustration of this canon of judgment, *viz.,* that the spiritual resurrection and the preserving in faith effected through the means of grace (Luke 2:34; Eph. 2:1; Col. 2:12) may be resisted or frustrated, while the bodily resurrection, which will be effected by God's sovereign command, cannot be resisted. (Matt. 25:31, 32; John 11:24.) See Mueller's *Christian Dogmatics,* p. 134; and Pieper's *Christliche Dogmatik,* I:559.

we give effect to our views by supporting our own democratic form of government in thought and deed and by opposing any political philosophy which would seek to substitute another form for it, even though this philosophy did not advocate the use of force.

The third principle is this: When we are really not able to decide whether a work is of God or of men, whether it is good or bad, advantageous or not, we should pause and stand aloof, *looking for developments which might reveal its true nature or effect.* If later developments convince us that it is either good or bad, the course which we ought to pursue with reference to it will then be clear.

May we assume that Gamaliel found himself in this predicament? Could he have truthfully made the plea that he found himself confronted with a situation in which the evidence at hand made it impossible for him to come to a definite decision? In answering this question it will be impossible for us to spare Gamaliel. To decide whether the Christian movement, as we might call it, was of men or of God should not have been difficult for him. As a Pharisee and teacher of the Law he was thoroughly familiar with Messianic prophecy. As one of the Sanhedrin he must have known the facts of the Savior's life, His teachings and miracles, for his very position would open to him many avenues for obtaining such information. Jesus had been arraigned before, and condemned by, the Sanhedrin, of which he was a member. He knew of Christ's resurrection and without a doubt of the miraculous events of Pentecost Day. He knew also of the complete change which the events of this day had wrought in the erstwhile timid apostles and of the miracles which they were performing. Indeed, so far as the miracles are concerned, we must bear in mind that one of these was the immediate occasion for the present trial of the apostles and that another, their wonderful delivery from prison in spite of guards, had but shortly before been brought to the attention of the Sanhedrists and had necessitated the rearrest of the apostles. *Verily with all of this evidence before him Gamaliel might well be thought to have been in a position to say not merely,* "If *this work be of God*"; *but* "That it IS of God we cannot deny!"

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