

Acts 5:33-39

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/acts/acts-5/acts-533-39/>

Many in the Council are enraged by the apostles' defense. They wish to kill them. But Gamaliel, a Pharisee, advises the other religious leaders to leave the apostles alone. He reminds the Council of two other men from the past who pretended to be sent by God, but when they died, their followers gave up their cause. If the apostles are not from God, their ministry will fail. If they are from God, then nothing can stop them, nor would the Council want to oppose God's will.

When the devout Jews gathered to hear Peter's sermon at Pentecost, when Peter called them to repent, they were "pierced to the heart" with guilt, and responded by asking, "Brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Sadly, this is not the same response of the hard-hearted religious leaders of the Council.

But when the religious leaders heard the same message, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill the apostles. Like the devout Jews who heard Peter's Pentecost sermon, the members of the council felt chastised. But rather than showing remorse, they desired revenge and retribution. God gave them a chance to repent, but they responded with murderous anger.

But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. Gamaliel is a Pharisee, so perhaps less invested or incensed by what happens at the temple, relative to the Sadducees, who viewed the temple as belonging to them. Luke tells us he is respected by all the people, which gives us the impression that he was a Pharisee with outstanding character. We are not told his heart response. What we are told shows wisdom on the part of Gamaliel. He responds with some pragmatic advice to maintain order, and likely also to prevent additional injustice. He sends the apostles outside for a short time so that he can calm the emotional temperature of the room and try to speak some sense into his fellow Council members.

We learn later that the Apostle Paul was taught by Gamaliel: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today" (Acts 22:3).

Here is Gamaliel's advice to the rest of the Sanhedrin, which results in Peter and the apostles' release:

Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away some people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered.

There are two rebellions/religious movements that had occurred in the recent past. One had been led by a man named *Theudas*, who made himself famous by *claiming to be somebody*. Who did he claim to be? The text does not say, but the rest of the *Council* must have known. It seems likely he claimed to be the Messiah. He accrued a following of *four hundred men*. People were interested in following this man, though he was outside the Council's authority and perhaps posed a threat to their power. But what happened to *Theudas*? He *was killed, and all who followed him dispersed and came to nothing*. His movement and mission died with him.

Then there was another man, *Judas of Galilee*. *Galilee* was the area of northern Israel where Jesus and the apostles were also from. This *Judas* caused a stir in the *days of the census*. The *census* was some thirty or so years prior, which led to Jesus being born in Bethlehem, since His earthly father Joseph was required to go to his hometown to be counted (Luke 2:1-6). *Judas*, another sort of false prophet or false Messiah, *drew away some people after him*, enough for the Sanhedrin to hear about and fret over. But what happened to *Judas of Galilee*? He *too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered*. His movement and mission died with him as well.

So, reasons Gamaliel, in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; just as the plan and action of Theudas and Judas were overthrown after their deaths. But the Sanhedrin should stay away from the apostles and let them alone, because there was a chance that they really were representing God. Gamaliel argues, but if their teaching is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.

This is as reasonable a perspective one could take given the circumstances, except perhaps to actually openly believe and profess what the apostles were saying was true, and to repent and openly put faith in Jesus as the Messiah. However, even if Gamaliel did believe, he might have been used by God here to save the lives of the apostles for the time being.

The apostles were working miracles daily, which could only be done by God's power. At this point, it has been over two months since Jesus's death, and more than 5000 Israelites were continuing to claim He was the Messiah, the Son of God, and were gathering and teaching in His name. Given the wisdom of Gamaliel, he might have realized this, and was playing an "inside game." However, we are not told his story.

Of course as we know, the legacy of Jesus Christ did not die with Him as with *Theudas* and *Judas*, because Jesus did not stay dead, and because He really was sent of God. *Gamaliel's* set of choices seems to be already answered based on his own logical construct—that Jesus and His apostles are *of God*. Nevertheless, it seems at this point that the Council is not going to believe anything, no matter how supernatural.

Notwithstanding, it seems that Gamaliel's argument is received, when he notes, matter-of-factly, and truly, that first, it's impossible to *overthrow* anyone who is acting on *God's* mission, and secondly, to oppose a messenger of God is to be *fighting against God* Himself. This is of course exactly what they are doing, and will continue to do. But no Sadducee or Pharisee or any of the *Men* and women *of Israel* would want to be seen as fighting *God*. Sadly, this reputational

argument is probably the most persuasive to the Council, as we already know their primary concern was how they were being viewed by the people (Acts 4:21).

In sum, Gamaliel's wisdom was, "Be cautious. Amazing things are undeniably happening through these men, but if God's not involved, this movement will eventually dissolve, whether you try to stop it or not, but if God is in fact behind it, then nothing will stop it. And if you choose to oppose it, you're going to find yourself opposing God." In this instance, Gamaliel's wisdom will prevail, although the apostles will be beaten.

Biblical Text

33 But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them. 34 But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. 35 And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. 36 For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. 37 After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away some people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. 38 So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God."