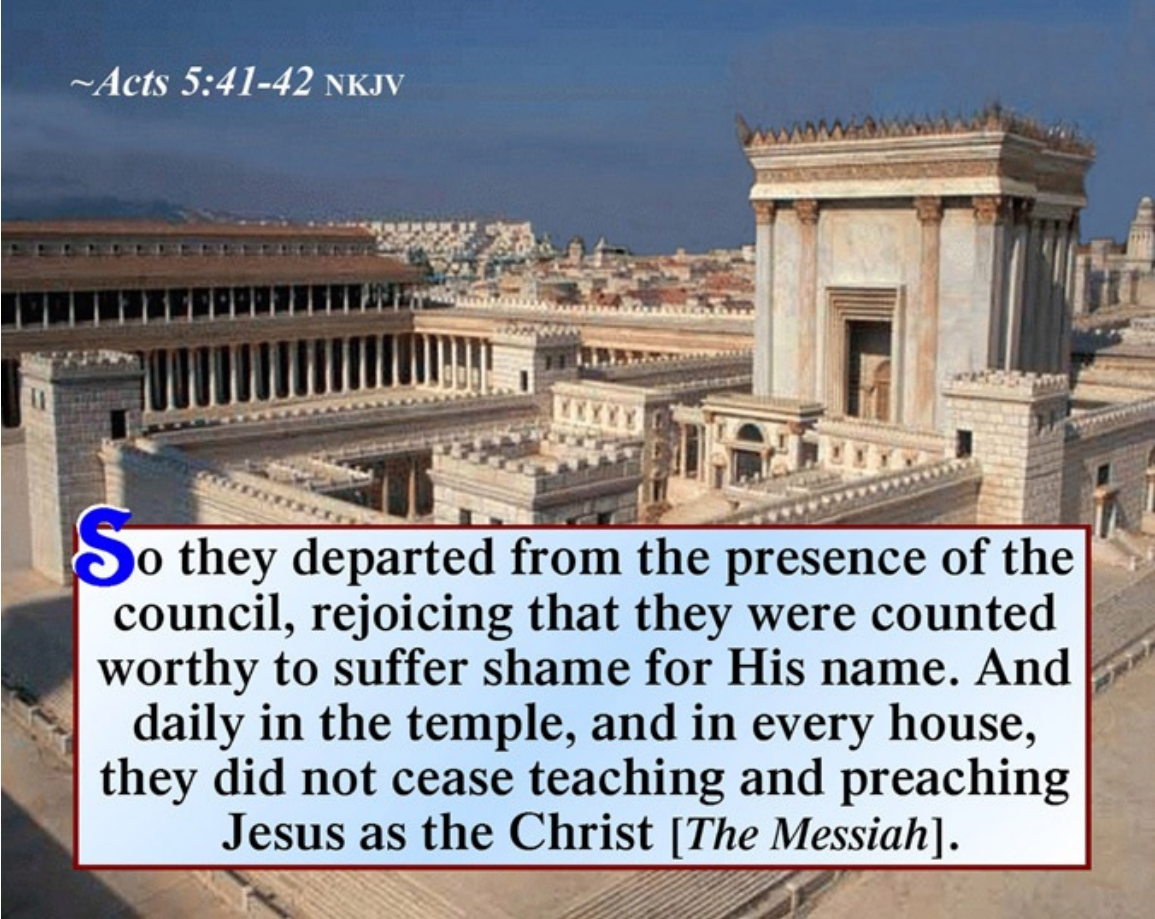


Hypocrisy in the Church and Suffering for the Lord

A Study in Acts Chapter 5

~Acts 5:41-42 NKJV

An aerial photograph of the Temple in Jerusalem, showing the large courtyard and the ornate facade of the Temple Mount. The sky is clear and blue.

So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ [*The Messiah*].

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Acts Chapter 5

In the first four chapters of Acts, everything we learned about the early Church at Jerusalem was very positive. They were a praying Church and they were Bible-centered, continuing steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles. They had a marvelous oneness and a unity that was scarcely replicated in later Church history. They demonstrated a sacrificial love for one another, meeting the needs of the saints at great personal cost. They were attacked from without, as the Jewish authorities lined up against them. The disciples were Spirit-filled and bold witnesses for Christ.

Now we come to a negative influence. In the first part of chapter five we learn of a serious Satanic attack from within. Sin was discovered within the camp of God's people, and it had to be dealt with swiftly and severely in order to maintain the purity of God's testimony. When God is truly at work, Satan will seek to counter and disrupt, but "greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

Acts 5:1-2

Ananias and Sapphira acted and conspired together. Their goal was to provide for themselves, and at the same time to make themselves look good in the eyes of the saints. They wanted to show themselves as more generous than they really were. They did not seem to realize that God knew all about their family conference. The name "Ananias" means "Jehovah is gracious" and the name Sapphira means "beautiful," but what they did was far from beautiful and made a mockery of God's grace. The "but" at the beginning of verse one shows that their deceitful actions were in sharp contrast to what Barnabas had done (Acts 4:36-37).

"But"—and this is the first word of chapter five. The devil despises harmony. He is the arch-promoter of discord. He loathed the purity of motive that prompted the Church to its generosity. He saw that the waters of unselfishness were flowing beneficently, and he prompted Ananias and Sapphira to contaminate the stream. Chapter five is the record of the manner in which God filtered out the foulness. The lying, deceiving couple received the severest penalty.¹

This couple sold a possession and kept back a part of it, but they claimed that the part they donated represented the entire purchase price. Sapphira was privy to this, meaning that she knew all about the scheme. They laid the money at the feet of the disciples so that it could be distributed to the believers in need. There was nothing wrong with keeping back part of the price (compare Acts 5:4). The selling of property was voluntary, not obligatory. God is a great Respector of personal property.

The problem was that Ananias and Sapphira kept back part of the price **in a deceptive way** (note the emphasis on "lying" in Acts 5:3-4, 8). They did one thing, but they made it look like they did something else. This involved not only lying but blatant hypocrisy and deceit. God was not fooled. The love of money has led to many a sin (1 Tim.6:10).

¹Charles J. Woodbridge, *Standing on the Promises—Rich Truths from the Book of Acts*, p. 36.

In Peter's first epistle he wrote that "judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Pet. 4:17). The first of all the eschatological judgments will be the judgment seat [*bema*] of Christ, a judgment for Church saints. God will deal with His Church first. It is also of interest to see how God's new dealings with His people are often met with public and supernatural purging. Such was the case in the theocracy of Israel as the older sons of Aaron tried to experiment and vary from God's instructions in offering up unauthorized fire in God's tabernacle. This was met with fire from God's presence which burned them to death instantly (Lev. 10:1-2). Their father Aaron and their brothers Eleazar and Ithamar were told not even to mourn for their dead family members (Lev. 10:6). For whatever reasons, Nadab and Abihu's sensitivities were dulled in terms of what their awesome responsibility was before the God of Israel in the holy place.

Another crisis took place as Israel first entered the promised land and conquered Jericho. The people were clearly commanded not to take any possessions from the defeated Canaanites, all of which God had put under a curse. Achan violated the command by secretly burying gold, silver and clothing under the ground. He was discovered by the God who sees in secret, and this "sin in the camp" had to be judged severely. Achan and his children were stoned and burned with fire (Joshua 7:10-26). It was a powerful object lesson pointing to the uncompromising holiness of God.

As the centuries go by, all kinds of horrible deeds are carried out by God's people, and in most cases nothing is done by God in terms of immediate judgment. But the pattern had been established, that even if one is not destroyed immediately, he deserves to be, and ultimately he will give account to God for what he has done.

Imagine if those in the Church today were judged as severely as Ananias and Sapphira, for lying, deceiving or for other such sins. You would hear a thunderous collapse of bodies in every assembly, and the Churches would be decimated.

The Old Testament gives us another frightful example of one who was instantly judged by God for acting in a deceptive way. One of the greatest prophets who ever lived in Israel was Elijah. It was a time of deep apostasy for the northern kingdom. This is the same Elijah whom God will someday honor after the rapture of the Church as one of the two witnesses in Jerusalem, in order to bring about the spiritual transformation of the nation. Elijah's God-honoring successor was Elisha. Elijah was carried up to heaven in a chariot of fire in full view of Elisha who received from God those same powers and privileges that were true of his master. One example of the use of these powers was with respect to Naaman the Syrian, a leprous general from Damascus. He had been told by a servant girl that there was a prophet in Israel who could heal him.

Naaman first sent a letter to Israel's king who was shocked at the request, knowing that he had no power or ability to help this diseased man. Elisha gained an audience with Naaman, not directly, but through a messenger, and told him to dip in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman was not impressed: first, because Elisha did not confront him face to face, and second, because he was not eager to be identified with the muddy waters of the Jordan when there were much cleaner waters in Damascus. His pride was offended until he received some wise counsel from his servants.

Elisha did not make a personal appearance, wave his hands, or do any kind of incantations. It was all about God, not about Elisha. Elisha simply wanted the general to do as God had said. It was an amazing test for this pagan general. After six times of coming up out of the water he still was not

helped or healed in any way. But, praise God, he was instantly and totally healed after the seventh immersion, so that his flesh was like the flesh of a little child.

Elisha refused any gifts from this thankful man, wanting God alone to get the credit and the glory. However, his deceitful servant Gehazi followed after Naaman, claiming that Elisha had changed his mind about the gifts, and Naaman was glad to oblige. This deceptive act destroyed the picture of the grace of God and the whole picture of salvation which the act of cleansing signified. The message of the free grace of God was now permanently contaminated in the mind of Naaman by this dastardly deed. Gehazi suffered immediate judgment as he was plagued for the rest of his life with the very kind of leprosy that Naaman had just been healed from (2 Kings 5:27).

Spiritual corruption and evil in Israel had to be dealt with severely, lest the entire nation become poisoned and contaminated (see Deut. 13:12-18). God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap (Gal. 6:7). We would expect nothing less from a holy God. Ananias and Sapphira were about to reap, based on what they had sown.

Acts 5:3-4

Ananias and Sapphira could have done what they wished to do with their property and with their money. The Church did not force them to do anything. Their sin involved pretending that they had given to the Church 100% of the proceeds of their possession, when in reality they had only given part of that and kept the rest for themselves. As believers we all face the same danger. For example, we sing William Newell's hymn, *At Calvary*, —“Now I've given to Jesus everything!” But have we really? Are we really being truthful as we sing? We could perhaps more honestly sing the hymn, “O For a Heart to Praise My God” (Charles Wesley), because this expresses a prayer and a desire. Even our hymns should be examined with discernment, lest we be indulging in any kind of hypocrisy in the words we sing. The Holy Spirit is intimately concerned about integrity, honesty and purity from the hearts of His children. May we never forget how HOLY He is!

The “father of lies” inspired Ananias to lie (John 8:44-45). That old serpent has been in the business of deceiving since the very beginning (Genesis 3).

What Ananias thought to be a secret known only to him and his wife, God knew and God somehow revealed it to Peter. Every believer needs to realize that “all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:13). We cannot hide anything from Omniscience. Peter was given a supernatural gift of discernment in this case (compare 1 Cor. 12:10).

In one sense, Ananias and Sapphira did not lie to God, but they lied to the Church. Their dissembling and hypocrisy was before men.² However, all sin is ultimately against God. David made this very clear in Psalm 51. Even though David had sinned against men (by committing adultery and covering it up by having the husband killed), yet he prayed, “**Against Thee, Thee only**, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight” (Psalm 51:4). While his sin was against men, yet ultimately it was against God and God alone. Ananias and Sapphira lied to believers, but ultimately their sin was also against God.

²One possibility is that Ananias and Sapphira made a promise to God that all the proceeds would go to the Church and then broke their word. In this sense they lied to the Holy Spirit.

We have in these verses an important declaration of the deity of the Holy Spirit. In verse 3 we read that Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit; in verse 4 he lied to God. The Holy Spirit is thus identified as God, not just as some spiritual force or influence.³ The Holy Spirit is a one hundred percent eternal, bona fide member of the Triune Godhead. He may be number three in the administrative management structure of the Godhead, next to the Son and next to the Father, but He is eternally God, possessing all the divine attributes, and He is to be loved, honored and respected accordingly.⁴

We assume that Ananias and Sapphira were believers. They identified themselves with the believers in Jerusalem. They were “among the multitude of them that believed” (Acts 4:32). They were most likely baptized, having confessed their faith in Christ. The Word of God does not give any indication that they were not saved. Some might say, “How could they be saved and commit such a sin?” We might also ask, how could David be saved and commit adultery and cover up his sin by murder? How could Noah be saved and get drunk? How could Solomon be saved and commit the abominations he committed in 1 Kings 11? How could Peter be saved and deny the Lord three times? And let us face the same question in a very personal way: “How could we be saved, in light of the sins which we have committed even as believers?” How we can thank God that when we sin, we have an Advocate (a Helper in Court) with the Father, even Christ Jesus, the Righteous One (1 John 2:1-2). He ever lives to make intercession for us (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). If today the Lord were to fatally smite every believer who tells a lie to other believers, how many would be buried?

Of course, the One who ultimately knows who are saved and who are not is the Lord: “The Lord knows those who are His: and, let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness” (2 Tim. 2:19). May God help each of us to know that we are saved (1 John 5:13) and to show that we are saved (James 2:14-26)!

How could Satan fill the heart of a believer (Acts 5:3)? Actually Peter was momentarily influenced in a similar way on one occasion. The Lord had announced that He would go to Jerusalem, suffer and be killed (Matt. 16:21). “Then Peter took Him aside, and began to rebuke Him, saying, God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You” (Matt. 16:21). Our Lord’s strong response to Peter was, “Get behind Me, Satan.” Satan filled Peter’s heart in order to cause him to strongly deny the necessity of the death of Christ. Likewise, Satan filled the heart of Ananias to cause him to lie to the Church and to God. Satan can strongly influence believers to sin. However, Ananias could not blame Satan and say, “Satan filled my heart and made me do this!” We learn in Acts 5:4 that Ananias was fully responsible and that he had conceived this thing in his own heart! Satan cannot do anything unless we give him an opening. “Do not give the devil an opportunity” (Eph. 4:27).

The New Testament clearly teaches the possibility of born again people dropping dead under divine judgement or chastisement: “For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judge ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are

³Jehovah’s Witnesses wrongly teach that the Holy Spirit is God’s “invisible active force” [*The Truth that Leads to Eternal Life*, p. 20]. This is a serious denial both of the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit. Mormonism’s teaching is just as blasphemous, saying that the Holy Spirit is “a divine substance or fluid” [*Key to Theology* by Parley P. Pratt, p. 38].

⁴For a detailed study on the Deity of the Holy Spirit, see <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/holyspir/hs02.pdf>

disciplined by the Lord, in order that we may not be condemned along with the world” (1 Cor. 11:30-32). In the context of this passage, there were certain Corinthian believers who were not observing the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner. In other words, in this wonderfully significant and beautiful ceremony they were not honoring the Lord by way of a reverent and humble remembrance of the Lord’s death. As a result, God executed maximum chastisement by putting an end to their physical life on earth. The term “sleep” is a euphemism for physical death, and includes a reminder that someday the dead bodies of believers will “awaken” from death at the time of the first resurrection (John 5:28-29; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

Some believers are such poor testimonies for the Lord that they must be removed from earth prematurely. Only God knows the exact reason why any believer dies, and it is impossible for us to know with certainty that a fellow believer was taken by God due to sin in his life. We need to be extremely careful about making such judgments because God alone knows all the reasons for why a believer dies. Some believers who are carnal and spiritually immature may long outlive other believers who have lived lives deeply devoted to the Saviour. God knows every situation, but we know from the teaching of Scripture that there are cases in which believers are chastened by the Heavenly Father, resulting in their death.⁵

Another example of severe discipline exercised towards believers would be the case of 1 Corinthians 5 where a man was guilty of unspeakable immorality, and the Church was instructed by the Apostle Paul to “deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:1-5). The implication is that Satan would be allowed to put this believer to death, but since he was a believer, his spirit would be saved. As it turned out, this man repented and the Church was instructed to forgive him (2 Cor. 2:5-8). The goal of Church discipline is first, to maintain the purity of God’s assembly, and second, to restore the sinning one to fellowship with God, if possible. Apparently a similar case involved Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom Paul delivered unto Satan (1 Tim. 1:20). Such people were believers, but they were turned over to Satan. Satan can only do what God allows him to do, and God is able to use Satan for His disciplinary purposes. But no matter what God allows Satan to do to an erring believer, we know his spirit will be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

We all need to recognize that we really do not deserve to live one day on this earth while we have this corrupt sinful nature, no matter how dedicated we are to Christ and no matter how well instructed we are in the Word of God. As we study the dealings of a holy God and learn more of His grace, the amazing thing is not that some believers supernaturally drop dead under God’s judgment, but that any of us are allowed to live! At the time of the Genesis flood God wiped out perhaps a billion people, saving only eight. When we learn the kind of man Noah was after the flood (Gen. 9:20-21), it is remarkable that God did not drown all people, Noah included! May the Lord help us to be totally sensitized to how fragile our existence really is as we live on this planet before a holy

⁵Some Bible teachers understand 1 John 5:16 (“sin leading to death”) as also referring to divine chastisement resulting in physical death for the believer. This passage, however, has been understood in different ways. See William MacDonald’s *Believer’s Bible Commentary* on 1 John 5:16, pages 2,324-2,325. Only God knows why someone dies, and the early disciples, in some cases, must have had supernatural discernment as to why people died.

God in our sinful condition.

What was astonishing was not that Ananias and Sapphira dropped dead, but that the twelve apostles did not likewise expire, in spite of their spiritual imperfections. God gave the early Church a rare and shocking visual aid, a wake up call designed to show that the Holy Spirit is in charge of His Church and He does not tolerate lying and dissimulation. Satan has access even to believers, and the remedy for this is clearly spelled out in 1 Peter 5:8 and James 4:7—"Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God....Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." The fact that the devil has access to a believer does not mean that a believer can be demon possessed. The child of God is Holy Spirit possessed, his body being God's temple (1 Cor. 6:19-20), and God is not going to share this home with the devil. Nevertheless, Satan can still deceive and influence believers, and he accuses us night and day in the presence of God (Rev. 12:10). Sadly, Satan does not have to work too hard to find evidence against us. How we can thank God that we have an Advocate with the Father, Christ Jesus the righteous One (1 John 2:1)!

MY ADVOCATE

I sinned. And straightway, post-haste, Satan flew
Before the presence of the Most High God,
And made a railing accusation there.
He said, "This soul, this thing of clay and sod,
Has sinned. 'Tis true that he has named Thy name,
But I demand death, for Thou hast said,
'The soul that sinneth, it shall die.' Shall not
Thy sentence be fulfilled? Is justice dead?
Send now this wretched sinner to his doom.
What other thing can [a] righteous ruler do?"

And thus he did accuse me day and night,
And every word he spoke, O God, was true!

Then quickly One rose up from God's right hand,
Before whose glory angels veiled their eyes.
He spoke, "Each jot and tittle of the law
Must be fulfilled: the guilty sinner dies!
But waitSuppose his guilt were all transferred
To ME and that I paid his penalty!
Behold My hands, My side, My feet! One day
I was made sin for him, and died that he
Might be presented faultless, at Thy throne!"

And Satan fled away. Full well he knew
That he could not prevail against such love,
For every word my dear Lord spoke was true!

--MARTHA SNELL NICHOLSON

Acts 5:5-6

How unfortunate that Ananias and his wife are forever remembered for this sin! Instead of being remembered for the gift they gave to the Church, they are remembered for the money they deceptively kept for themselves.

Ananias gave up the spirit [literally, “he expired”]. He died immediately. He was given no opportunity to repent. Great fear came upon the Church as they learned that death could be the consequence of sin. This judgment was executed speedily. In the book of Ecclesiastes God exposed one of the great problems of the American judicial system: “Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (Eccl. 8:11). Crimes are committed, and yet the sentence is not executed until years later, if at all. Indeed, capital punishment, which was ordained by God after the flood (Gen. 9:6), is rarely practiced in our country today. Thus crime is not deterred because criminals know that they will not be punished in a severe and timely fashion.

The Bible defines physical death as the separation of a person’s spirit from his body. This happened in the case of Ananias as his spirit departed his body. It happened to a man who was very possibly in the prime of life, and it happened very suddenly. The result was that great fear came upon those who heard these things. The Lord was not playing games. God took this matter very seriously.

Acts 5:7-9

These verses shed further light on the exact nature of this sin. The lie told by Ananias and Sapphira had to do with the selling price of their land. They did not accurately report the full price, but deceptively claimed that it was sold for a lesser price, and then kept back a good portion of the price for themselves (verse 2). This was something they agreed upon together and they were both equally culpable. They both decided to lie and they both carried out the deception with Ananias lying first, and Sapphira lying three hours later. Both were met with the same life-ending punishment.

Peter gave Sapphira the opportunity to tell the truth, but she failed the test. As they planned their deception together, so they were buried together. Of Ananias it was said that he lied to the Holy Spirit; concerning Sapphira, it was said that she tempted the Spirit of the Lord. That is, she put Him to the test. “Lord, since we are giving a good amount of money to the Church, will You overlook the fact that we decided to keep part for ourselves, even though we pretended to give the full amount?” What may seem reasonable to sin-blinded men, does not pass the holiness test with God.

Peter told Sapphira that “the feet of them which have buried your husband are at the door” (Acts 5:9). The expression “at the door” means “near at hand.” A similar expression is used of the Lord’s coming. In James 5:8 we are told that the coming of the Lord draws near. How near is it? “The Judge stands before the door” (James 5:9). He is very near at hand!

Acts 5:10-11

Sapphira met with the same fate as her husband. After she heard Peter’s message, she died immediately and was carried out and was buried next to her husband. They were partners in deceit, partners in death and partners in the grave. This produced great fear among the believers. Church discipline, in this case executed by God, is a healthy deterrent. God was not playing games. Sin is

serious business. God is not pleased when there is “sin in the camp.” God’s chastening was swift.

The form this particular miracle took—its violent, deadly nature—is unusual. The Holy Spirit was teaching the Church a basic lesson, one of which she needs often to be reminded. The lesson is this: Purity is a condition of power. The Church must be clean to be conquering, disciplined to be daring, holy to be happy. Ananias and Sapphira were blots on the Church’s escutcheon [a shield or emblem bearing a coat of arms]. They had to be removed. Pure first, then powerful. Pure first, then peaceable.⁶

This was a unique time in Church history when the local Church was also the universal Church. All born-again members of the body and bride of Christ were at this time members of the Jerusalem local Church. It would not be long before Churches would also be established in other cities and localities. We also see in Acts 5 the distinction between the Church militant and the Church triumphant. The Church militant is made up of all Church-age believers who are on earth fighting the good fight of faith. The Church triumphant are those believers, such as Ananias and Sapphira, who have been promoted to glory (or in their case of chastening discipline, perhaps better to say, “demoted to glory”). A split second after they died, Ananias and Sapphira were sinless, no longer possessing an old nature, and awaiting the resurrection which will take place at the rapture of the Church. Countless other believers will soon join them, including Stephen (Acts 7:59-60) and James (Acts 12:2), just to name two. Of course, immediately after the rapture, all believers in Christ must stand before the judgment seat of Christ to have our post-salvation works evaluated by the Righteous Judge (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:10-16; 2 Cor. 5:9-10; 2 Tim. 4:7-8).

The term “Church” is used in verse 11. It was the assembly of those who had believed (compare Acts 4:32).⁷ In the Septuagint this Greek word, *ekklesia*, is used of the “*congregation of Israel*.” “Assembly” or “congregation” is a good translation.

Acts 5:12

Many signs and wonders were being performed by the apostles. These were, for the most part, healing miracles (verse 15), and also involved the casting out of demons (verse 16). These were wonderful answers to the prayer of the believers recorded in Acts 4:29-30. The purpose of these miracles was to authenticate the gospel message and put God’s seal of approval on the messengers. We are not to look for these same signs and wonders today. Acts is a transitional book, and many things took place at that time which are not the norm for today. Today in the Church we do not have apostles, nor do we have prophets. These were foundational men (Eph. 2:20) who were needed at the beginning of the Church age, especially since the New Testament books had not yet been written.

⁶Charles J. Woodbridge, *Standing on the Promises—Rich Truths from the Book of Acts*, p. 36.

⁷This may be the first occurrence of the term *ekklesia* in the book of Acts, because the term is absent from many Greek manuscripts in Acts 2:47.

Many have erred by seeking to make tongues and healings the norm for the Church today.⁸

Solomon's porch was again a public meeting place for the believers, a place where huge crowds would gather (compare Acts 3:11). It was located to the east of the temple.

Acts 5:13

The rest of the people did not dare join the Church in Jerusalem. They were very reluctant to join with the believers, especially after seeing how God judged Ananias and Sapphires. This was a negative Church growth program. People were afraid to join the disciples (compare the "great fear" mentioned in verses 5 and 11). A holy God was doing a great work, and would not tolerate sin and lying and hypocrisy. Who would want to join such a group of believers unless they were serious about following the Lord?

One of the problems of the modern Church is that people are invited to join without personal cost or sacrificial involvement. Church membership is like joining a gym or going to a vacation resort. People do so because they are told about all of the benefits they will receive. So it is with Christianity. Often nothing is said about the cost of discipleship. What if people were really told the truth? **If you become a true follower of Christ, the following will be true of you:** You will be hated by the world (John 15:18-19; 1 John 3:13). You will be persecuted even as Jesus was (John 15:20). You will no longer partake in worldly activities (1 Pet. 4:3-4). Your former friends will speak evil of you (1 Pet. 4:4). You will renounce your possessions and understand that all you have belongs to Christ (Luke 14:33; 1 Cor. 6:19-20). You will love Christ more than you love any other person close to you (Matt. 10:37). You will deny yourself and say "No" to all your personal desires, plans and ambitions (Matt. 16:24). You will go through very difficult trials and your faith will be severely tested (1 Pet. 4:12). You will be ready, if need be, to die for your faith (Acts 21:13; Matt. 10:28). **Would you want to join under such conditions?** Here was Paul's answer: "But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:7-8).

Acts 5:14

Many more became believers in Christ and were added to Christ's Church, although we are not given a count of the converts as in Acts 2:41 or 4:4. May we not be fixated on numbers, but on God who gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). God keeps accurate records; that is His business. May we be found faithful in that which is least (Luke 16:10; 1 Cor. 4:2).

There seems to be a contradiction here. On the one hand, people dared not join the Church at Jerusalem, a Church where a holy God was working and where sin and hypocrisy were not tolerated (verse 13). On the other hand, people magnified the believers and held them in high regard (verse 13) and multitudes were being saved and were being added to the body of Christ in Jerusalem (verse

⁸For further study of these important matters, see John C. Whitcomb, *Does God Want Christians to Perform Miracles Today?* [BMH Books], 1973, and Richard Mayhue, *Divine Healing Today* [Moody Press], 1983.

14). People did not dare join, but many were joining!⁹ The Church both attracted and repelled. It repelled the casual onlooker who may have been curious, but in whose heart there was no genuine working of the Spirit of God. It attracted those whose hearts were fertile ground for God's Word, souls whom God was drawing to Himself. If only the Church today would have such a powerful witness:

There is a toleration which is treachery. There is a peace which issues in paralysis. There are hours when the church must say No, to those who should ask communion with her, in the doing of her work, upon the basis of compromise. Such standing aloof may produce ostracism and persecution; but it will maintain power and influence. If the Church of God in the cities of today were aloof from the maxims of the age, separated from the materialistic philosophies of the schools, bearing her witness alone to the all-sufficiency of Christ, and the perfection of His salvation, even though persecuted and ostracized and bruised, it would be to her that men would look in the hour of their heartbreak and sorrow and national need. The reason why men do not look to the Church today is that she has destroyed her own influence by compromise.¹⁰

God dealt with His Church severely in order to keep it pure. Church growth resulted. Sadly today many Churches are seeking to grow in numbers without making purity a priority. The assembly must keep itself pure and true to Christ and His Word in every way. Our growth first and foremost must involve increasing in the knowledge of the Holy One (Col. 1:10; 2 Pet. 3:18). Beyond that, God will give the increase in His time and in His way (1 Cor. 3:6).

Acts 5:15-16

These verses further elaborate on the statement of verse 12, that many signs and wonders were done by the Lord, working through the apostles.

Notice that these people were "all being healed" (verse 16). This is similar to the healing ministry of the Lord Jesus of which is it said, "He healed them all" (Matt. 12:15). Modern-day faith healers do not heal everyone and they do not empty hospital rooms. They sometimes blame their failures

⁹The difference between "none of the rest dared join them" (v. 13, NKJV) and "believers were more than ever added to the Lord" (v. 14) is absolute. Both things happened as a result of the ultimate divine disciplinary action taken on Ananias and Sapphira and the "great fear [that] came upon all the assembly, and upon all who heard these things." There is no contradiction at all because the former was purely man's doing (non-doing), a completely natural reaction of entire human origin; while the latter ("more than ever") was the result of a sovereign, divine grace worked in the individual hearts of lost souls which brought them to faith in Christ, notwithstanding the solemn circumstances of Ananias and Sapphira. For they were "those who believed through grace" (Acts 18:27). Thus for the time being there was no in-rush of false professors "joining themselves" to the company of believers; rather it was God who was doing the only effectual work of "adding" real believers (not they adding themselves) "to the Lord" as members of Him and of His Body, the one Church on earth.

¹⁰G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts of the Apostles*, [Fleming H. Revell, 1934], p. 493.

on those who are afflicted, claiming that these sick ones did not have enough faith. However, the Lord and the apostles healed people whether they had faith or not, because we are told that they healed them all.

These healings were spectacular in nature. Apparently the apostles did not necessarily have to lay their hands upon the sick. Just the mere proximity of Peter to the sick person was sufficient (Acts 5:15). We are reminded of the woman who merely touched the edge Lord's garment in such a way that the disciples were not even aware that anything had happened (Luke 8:43-48). Later in Acts 19 handkerchiefs or aprons which had been close to Paul's body were used in healing the sick and casting out evil spirits (Acts 19:12). Such a practice was special and unique and never intended to be the norm for today.¹¹

These sign-miracles also included the deliverance of those who were tormented and possessed by demons (Acts 5:16). What was happening was so remarkable that it drew great crowds not only from Jerusalem, but also from the surrounding cities (Acts 5:16). The Jerusalem Church was reaching people from beyond its own borders (compare Acts 1:8), and when they came to be healed, they would certainly also receive sound gospel preaching.

It is likely that before 70 A.D. the sign miracles had come to an end. Consider the following:

1) 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (about 55 A.D.)

Paul was afflicted with a painful ("thorn") bodily ("in the flesh") ailment. Paul prayed three times that God would remove this thorn in the flesh from him, but God did not do this. God did something better. He taught Paul the sufficiency of His grace, that God's grace was enough even to enable him to endure such a physical affliction. Sometimes God allows sickness or pain in order to teach us His all-sufficient grace.

2) Philippians 2:25-30 (about 61 A.D.)

Epaphroditus was seriously sick, to the point where he was near death. It is interesting to note that Paul did not heal this faithful brother. God had mercy on him and raised him up.

3) 1 Timothy 5:23 (about 62 A.D.)

"No longer drink water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." Timothy had a stomach problem and he was often sick. Paul did not tell him to see a healer, nor did Paul tell him that his physical problems were due to sin or a lack of faith. Paul merely gave Timothy a commonsense prescription. Athenaeus, the Grammarian (280 A.D.), wrote the following: "Let him take sweet wine, either mixed with water or warmed, especially that kind called protopos, the sweet Lesbian glukus, as being good for the stomach; for sweet wine (oinos) does not make the head heavy" (Athenaeus, Banquet 2,24). This is an example from ancient literature

¹¹Some modern faith-healers make a big-time operation out of this. "Send us your handkerchief along with a \$50.00 donation, and we will pray over it and return it to you (without the money)." Such false teachers enrich themselves at the expense of people who are easily led astray.

showing that sweet wine was recommended as a remedy for stomach problems.

4) 2 Timothy 4:20 (about 64 B.C.)

“Erastus remained at Corinth, but Trophimus I left sick at Miletus.” There is no indication that Trophimus had a spiritual problem (sin, lack of faith), but he did have a physical problem and Paul did not heal him. It is sometimes the will of God for His children to be sick in this life, but never in the next life (Rev. 22:4).

Why then were the apostles given this ability in the early days of the Church? It served as God’s public endorsement of their ministry, and an open confirmation of their divine authority in the foundational stage of the early Church before all the Scriptures were completed. By such miracles, God put His stamp of approval on His preachers and on their message.

Acts 5:17-18

Wonderful things happened as the result of God purging His Church due to the spectacular hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira. They died and were buried and countless others were terrified that they too might be candidates for immediate judgment. Such events must have had a cleansing effect upon the Church. Many were in a state of awe of the apostles because of their miracle-working powers and were hesitant to join such a group. Yet there were others who opened their hearts to God’s working and who dared to join with the believers. No wonder that the Church was about to face persecution. When there is a shining testimony for the Lord, that is when the forces of darkness rise up in opposition. When God is working through His people, the enemy gets aroused, and persecution is often the result.

Caiaphas was the High Priest at this time. Christ had appeared before Caiaphas and his father-in-law Annas at His unlawful trials. Caiaphas, his family, and those with him were of the sect of the Sadducees. Dressed in his high priestly garments, Caiaphas looked quite impressive, but in fact he was a disgrace to the Jewish faith, being a resurrection-denying and angel-denying apostate (Matthew 22:23; Acts 23:7-8).¹² Annas, the former High Priest, still had considerable influence, and it is possible that Luke was referring to him in this passage (see Acts 4:6 where Annas is called the High Priest, though not recognized so by Rome).

These ruling Sadducees were enraged by what was happening. How sad that these leaders were angry that people were being healed and others under demonic bondage were being delivered! They should have rejoiced. They were also perturbed that the Apostles kept on preaching the resurrection, even though they had threatened them not to do so (Acts 4:2, 16-17). They witnessed the amazing growth of the Church, as the numbers of believers kept multiplying (Acts 5:14). And people well beyond the borders of Jerusalem were flocking to the city because of the spectacular healing miracles

¹²One positive thing that could be said of the Sadducees was that they claimed to believe in the inerrancy and absolute truth of everything in the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy). Thus they were Biblical creationists and believed in the worldwide flood. They insisted that the Pentateuch did not teach a resurrection of the dead, but the Lord Jesus proved them wrong on that by pointing to Exodus chapter 3. See the Lord’s argument in Matthew 22:31-33.

(Acts 5:16). Something had to be done! So the apostles, who were probably preaching in Solomon's colonnade, were apprehended and locked up in prison. In chapter 4 only Peter and John were taken, but now all twelve of the apostles. We are not given details, but we wonder if these servants of Christ were praying and singing in prison as Paul and Silas did later (Acts 16:25). No doubt they were rejoicing (compare Acts 5:41). Keep in mind that the apostles had no guarantee that they would be released from prison. For all they knew, they might be put to death. Christ had already taught them not to fear those who could kill the body (Matt. 10:28).

Acts 5:19-20

God used an angel to set free the apostles from their short-term imprisonment. The Sadducees, who were responsible for their arrest, did not believe in angels (Acts 23:8), and God, almost humorously, used what they did not believe in to effect the release of His servants. The translation should be "an angel of the Lord" and not "the angel of the Lord" (the Greek article is not used). "The angel of the LORD" was an Old Testament term referring to the pre-incarnate second Person of the triune Godhead. He appeared from time to time in human form, as when He appeared along with two angels to Abram and Sarah or when He appeared to the parents of Samson. However, when Jesus Christ became incarnate, He became a permanent member of the human race and never again appears as "the angel of the LORD."¹³

When the expression "an angel of the Lord" occurs in the New Testament it refers to an angel, not to a divine Person. This angel was a messenger or agent of God who was given power and authority to fulfill this divine assignment. Later we will see a similar activity on the part of an angel in Acts 12 when Peter was rescued from death row.

Today God does not normally use angels to perform miraculous works, and yet He uses them in His providential care and keeping of His saints: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" (Heb. 1:14). Much of this ministry goes unnoticed and underappreciated by us, but we can certainly thank God for His daily provision for His children and for whatever assistance the angels provide.

Consider the fascinating message of this angel: "Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life." The apostles received an angelic encouragement to continue to boldly spread the Word of God (compare Acts 4:20,29). God entrusted to these men the words of this life, that is, the only words that are able to bring eternal life to all who will embrace the message. Jesus said, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and **they are life**" (John 6:63). Only Christ, and no one else, has **the words of eternal life** (John 6:68), and the apostles were bearers of His words. In this world dominated by death, may we faithfully hold forth the **word of life** (Phil. 2:16). Christianity is not just a creed or set of beliefs, but it is a LIFE, a LIFE centered in the Person of Jesus Christ who is our LIFE (John 14:6; Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:3-4).

We could imagine the apostles saying to the angel, "Sir, thank you for releasing us, but this means we are in for more trouble and further persecution. Here's a suggestion. Why don't you go and preach the gospel in this city and to the ends of the earth? You are very powerful and you can

¹³For a study on the usage of "the angel of the LORD" in the Old Testament and how this term referred to a Person who was fully God, see Special Topic #1 at the end of this chapter.

withstand the opposition.” While it is true that an angelic messenger will be used of God to proclaim the everlasting gospel during the future time of tribulation (Rev. 14:6-7), yet in this dispensation God has entrusted His gospel to those of us who are saved.¹⁴ What an awesome privilege and responsibility to be His representatives and ambassadors, urging men and women to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:19-21). God has committed this message of reconciliation to us, not to angels (2 Cor. 5:19).

Acts 5:21-23

These verses offer an amazing illustration of the fact that the Word of God is not bound (2 Tim. 2:9). Having been miraculously delivered, they went very early in the morning to teach God’s truth. At this point their captors did not even realize they had escaped! The members of the Sanhedrin (70 men along with the High Priest) met together and told their officers to fetch the prisoners. Those guarding the prisoners had a great responsibility. If prisoners were to escape under their watch, it would normally result in severe penalties. Apparently not even the guards were aware that the apostles had been freed. The doors were still locked and the guards were properly stationed before the doors, but when the prison doors were opened, the cell was empty! The Lord was certainly getting their attention.

There is a parallel here with the resurrection. The giant stone was rolled away, not to let Jesus out of the tomb, but to show everyone that the tomb was empty. So here, the doors were unlocked, not to let the prisoners out, but for all to see that the prison cell was empty.

Acts 5:24-25

“When the captain of the Temple guard and the chief priests heard this report they were completely mystified at the apostles’ disappearance and wondered what further developments there would be” (verse 24, Phillips translation). Where would this all lead to? They thought they had the situation under control and they were shocked by the news that the prisoners were gone. Had the guards been bribed? Had the guards been converted during the night (as many guards were later converted when Paul was a prisoner)? No, God was responsible for the release of these men, not the guards.

The news brought by the next messenger further deepened their perplexity and distress, as they learned that their prisoners were now standing in the temple courtyard teaching the people. The apostles did not leave the jail to flee and hide, but they went to a most public location to boldly preach Christ, almost inviting the authorities to arrest them again!

Acts 5:26

The miraculous release from prison was an amazing demonstration of the sovereignty of God in bringing to naught the devices and counsels of the Sanhedrin. These men were the ones who were

¹⁴This unique presentation of the everlasting gospel by an angel in Revelation 14 in no way diminishes the responsibility of saved individual on earth, during the tribulation, to proclaim the gospel. The angel will announce judgment from the God who created all things (Rev. 14:7). Believers on earth will certainly need to add to this and proclaim the message of a crucified and risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:3-4) as well as announcing that the kingdom of God is near (Matt. 24:14).

truly on trial. God made them objects of absolute ridicule by recording their acts in His Holy Scriptures, and showing the foolish things they did in the light of irrefutable proof of divine intervention. They did not even believe in the existence of angels and yet God used a “non-existent” angel to effect the apostles’ release from prison.

The temple police force apprehended the apostles for the second time. The astonishing thing is that the apostles surrendered and returned to prison without one complaint, one protest, one iota of resistance. The apostles did not seem overly concerned about being apprehended again. Having been miraculously delivered from their first imprisonment, they knew that being in prison was no problem for God and they probably looked forward to further opportunities to witness while in jail. We soon learn that their attitude during this time was one of complete rejoicing (Acts 5:41).

The impact that the apostles and the Christian population had made on the public was so favorable that the temple police force feared that they might be stoned if they were to use unreasonable force in making this second arrest. The apostles were held in such high esteem that later, when believers had to flee Jerusalem because of fierce persecution, the apostles were able to remain in the city (Acts 8:1).

Acts 5:27-28

The High Priest asked the apostles why they were disobedient to the command given to them by the Sanhedrin. The more obvious question would have been, “How in the world did you escape from our prison?” The High Priest was perhaps very cautious about the possibility that a miracle had happened and thought it better not to pursue that point any further. In his view, if any miracle had taken place it must have been Satanic because Jesus was a false Messiah, one who blasphemously claimed to be God. He was concerned that all Jerusalem was being filled with their teaching. He knew that their message of a crucified and risen Messiah was spreading everywhere, and what right did these uneducated, unsophisticated fishermen have to pretend to enlighten religious leaders on spiritual matters? They were the leaders of Israel and was it not their right to be the arbiters of what doctrine was true and what was false? It is a sad reminder of today as millions of people in this world are told that they cannot really understand the Bible without the priests and proper religious authorities telling them what to believe. The tragedy is that those who follow this kind of religious system will not be told God’s true way of salvation, resulting in the doom of multitudes of misled people.

These Jewish leaders were incensed that they were being blamed for the murder of Jesus Christ: “[you] intend to bring this man’s blood upon us” (verse 28; compare Acts 2:23; 3:14-15; 4:10). The High Priest would not even mention Jesus by name, simply calling Him, “this man.” The irony of his statement is clear. The Jewish people had previously taken full responsibility for the death of Jesus: “His blood be on us, and on our children” (Matt. 27:25). The truth of the matter is that we are all responsible for the death of Christ because it was for our sins that He suffered and bled and died. His blood was shed so that we might have complete forgiveness of sins and have peace with God (Acts 10:43; Rom. 5:1). He shed His blood to save us from an eternal hell. “The apostles had no desire to bring the blood of Christ to the door of these men. Their desire was to bring that blood to their hearts, that they might be saved from their sin.”¹⁵

¹⁵John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 102.

It was because of Israel's unbelief and rejection of Him that Jesus said, "Ye shall not see me henceforth, until you shall say, Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Matt. 23:39). He did not say, "You will never see Me." He said, "You will not see me until...." His coming again is certain, but He will not come until there is genuine repentance on the part of the nation Israel. This amazing transformation of the nation could happen within a decade. The rapture could take place soon, and soon thereafter God will use the seven-year tribulation (Daniel's 70th week) to test and purify His people, and at the end of that period, those who survive will bless the name of their Messiah and will receive Him and welcome Him. All Israel will be saved (Rom. 11:26), and their national repentance is clearly seen in Zechariah chapter 12, as they look upon the One whom they pierced and greatly mourn over what they have done.

Caiaphas once gave a great prophecy in the providence of God. He unconsciously predicted that Christ would die for the entire nation. S. Lewis Johnson has commented on this remarkable passage found in John 11:49-51:

Caiaphas, the high priest, actually uttered a prophecy concerning the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. Now he didn't realize what he was saying because his tongue was under the control of God but he didn't realize it. But still it's a remarkable statement. "It's expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not." If that had come from a friend of our Lord and from a follower of Him, we would have said that's a good statement concerning the death of Christ, "It's expedient for us that one should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." But it was uttered by an unbelieving man who counseled with the council to put Him to death. It's one of those statements under the direction of God which glorifies the Son even contrary to the intentions of the individual who uttered it.¹⁶

Thus, the enemy of Christ actually gave glory to God by uttering a wonderful statement about Christ's substitutionary death for others. How we must thank God for "this Man's blood" (Acts 5:28).

Acts 5:29

Peter was the spokesman, but the other apostles were in full agreement with him: "We ought to obey God rather than men." They had to obey the higher Authority, One who was far greater than the Jewish High Priest.¹⁷ The term "ought" is not merely suggestive; it means that it was absolutely necessary to obey. The same term was used by Jesus when He said, "Ye **must** be born again" (John 3:7).

¹⁶ Found at <http://sljinstitute.net/gospel-of-john/the-prophecy-of-caiaphas/> [accessed 4/11/18].

¹⁷ See our commentary under Acts 4:19-20 for numerous Bible examples of God's people obeying God rather than men.

Acts 5:30

Peter wasted no time in telling these religious leaders that they were responsible for the death of Christ: “whom ye slew and hung on a tree” (compare Acts 2:23; 3:15; 4:10-11). He also set before them the powerful fact of the resurrection of Christ, the teaching they hated the most (compare Acts 4:2).¹⁸ He spoke of the “God of our fathers,” and he included the Sanhedrin in this. These Israelites all had the same ancestry, and they all came from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And they all had the same God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The question was whether they would approve of the Man whom their God had approved (Acts 2:22). It is essential that we receive the testimony of God concerning His Son (1 John 5:9-13).

The significance of one “hanging on a tree” is found in Deuteronomy 21:22-23. When a criminal was executed, his body would be publicly displayed in order to be an object lesson and a source of terror for any potential criminals in the land, and that body was to be taken down from the tree before sunset. The Romans did not follow that guideline in crucifixions that they implemented (some criminals would stay on crosses for days), but God mercifully had the body of Jesus taken down from the cross before sunset. How we can thank God for what was accomplished on Calvary’s tree: “Who His own self bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, should live unto righteousness, for by His wounds you were healed” (1 Pet. 2:24).

Acts 5:31

God the Father exalted His beloved Son, by way of resurrection and ascension, to the highest place of all, even to the right hand of the Majesty on High (Heb. 1:3; 8:1). He did this after Christ had first “purged our sins” (Heb. 1:3) by His finished work on the cross which perfectly satisfied the demands of justice.¹⁹ He occupies this exalted place as Prince or Ruler or Leader. The term was also used in Acts 3:15, “the Prince of life.” He is also exalted as “Savior” (Acts 5:31), the Father having been fully satisfied by the redemptive work which He accomplished.

The gospel went “to the Jew first” (Rom. 1:16), and God gave His people Israel opportunity for repentance.²⁰ All who repent are promised complete forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38;

¹⁸It’s possible that the expression “raised up Jesus” (v. 30) could refer to the incarnation, because it is mentioned prior to His death. According to this view, God raised up a Savior when God the Son became flesh. The fact of the resurrection would be implied in verse 31 (“exalted”). However, most commentators understand “raised up Jesus” as a reference to the resurrection, including William Kelly who wrote, “Here, it is no longer the ambiguous word ἀνέστησεν, but the more determinate ἤγειρεν, not merely raising Him up as a living Messiah on earth, as in Acts 3:22, 26; Acts 7: (18), 37; Acts 13:33, but waking [raising] Him up after death. Nor was resurrection all: for God exalted Him.”

¹⁹This is the only “purgatory” the Scripture speaks of, a purging of sins based on the finished work of Christ, accomplished once and for all (Heb. 1:3).

²⁰God did not “give repentance to Israel” in the sense that all Israel actually repented. The fact is that the great majority of the nation refused to repent. So the meaning seems to be that He gave Israel *the opportunity* to repent. The fact that God has given hell-deserving sinners the

3:19). As Church history unfolded, there were individual Jews who repented and came to Christ and were forgiven, but the nation as a whole rejected Him. Israel's national repentance and forgiveness must await His second coming (Rom. 11:25-27).

Acts 5:32

The apostles were witnesses both of His victorious resurrection and His glorious ascension. The most perfect witness of Christ, the One who bears testimony of Him, is the Holy Spirit: "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, **He shall testify of Me**" (John 15:26). We know that the Holy Spirit was given to every believer (Rom. 8:9). Why then does it say that He is given to those who obey God? Does this mean that a person must demonstrate perfect or near perfect obedience in order to be qualified to be a witness or even to be saved?²¹ No, sanctification is a process whereby the child of God is conformed more and more to the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). It does not happen all at once, and it will never be fully completed in this life. No believer perfectly obeys the Savior whom he loves, but we desire to obey more fully. A clue to this dilemma is found in Acts 6:7 where we find the expression "obedient to the faith." The general call of salvation comes in the form of a command: "But now [God] commandeth all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). When men refuse to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, they are refusing to obey the gospel. So the Holy Spirit is given to all who obey God, that is, who obey the gospel by believing on Christ.²²

Acts 5:33

These Jewish leaders were under deep conviction. The Word of God, the sword of the Spirit, was cutting deeply into their souls (Acts 2:37; Heb. 4:12; Eph. 6:17). The verb "cut" means "to saw asunder, to be cut in two, hence figuratively, to be sawn through mentally, to be cut to the heart (see also the verb in Acts 7:54). True Biblical preaching does not tickle the ears or scratch the back, but it cuts to the heart. These Jewish leaders hated the message, so they wanted to destroy the messengers, and they began to make plans to put them to death.

Acts 5:34

At the very moment in Church history when it appeared that the leaders of the early Church, God's chosen apostles, would all be put to death, God did an incredible thing to prevent this from happening. One of the members of the Sanhedrin was an enormously respected and apparently very elderly theologian by the name of Gamaliel. This same man had been Paul's teacher (Acts 22:3), Paul's professor of theology. When Paul was a young man, he came to Jerusalem from Tarsus, the capital city of Cilicia (the southeasterly province of Asia Minor along the Mediterranean Sea). In Jerusalem Paul sat at the feet of Gamaliel as his disciple. Paul was taught the deep things of Jewish

opportunity to repent is certainly a great gift of God.

²¹Beware of "Lordship Salvation" teachings where obedience, surrender, and measuring up to the high demands of discipleship are presented as terms or conditions of salvation. See <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/salvatio/lordshrq.pdf>.

²²Is obedience a condition of salvation? See Special Topic #2 at the end of this chapter.

theology and was immersed in the Old Testament Scriptures.

We learn more about Gamaliel from secular historians including Josephus. He was the first of only seven men in all history to have bestowed upon him the title *Rabban* (“our master,” as opposed to the more common Rabbi, “my master”). He was the grandson of the great rabbi Hillel the Elder, who founded the most lenient version of Pharisaism, and who was well-known for his allowance of divorce for almost any cause. Gamaliel became Hillel’s successor, leading the Pharisaic movement. He played a prominent role on the Sanhedrin, serving as the co-chair along with the High Priest. When he requested that the apostles leave the room, his command was obeyed right away. This man had enormous respect among the people and great influence.

Acts 5:35

With the apostles now absent, Gamaliel spoke to the members of the Sanhedrin. He was strongly opposed to putting the apostles to death, and he strongly cautioned his colleagues not to act rashly, and presented to them a fascinating argument. It no doubt took some courage on the part of Gamaliel to speak out against the majority opinion. We are reminded of the time when Nicodemus showed courage by defending Jesus before the Jewish leaders who were determined to do Him harm (John 7:45-53).

Acts 5:36

Gamaliel brought up an incident from history with which his hearers were familiar. It involved a man named Theudas, who had a very high opinion of himself: “boasting himself to be somebody.” We are reminded of Paul’s wise word to the Galatians, “If a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself” (Gal. 6:3). Self-deceived Theudas gathered around him about 400 men and led a rebellion. However, he accomplished nothing but his own destruction. His men were scattered and the entire effort came to naught. Proud Theudas did not even receive significant recognition in the history books because this event is not well documented. We do know that many insurgent leaders arose after the death of Herod the Great and this man may have been one of them. Josephus mentions a man by the same name who lived at a much later time (around 44 A.D.).

Acts 5:37

Gamaliel’s second example was similar. Judas rose up and led a revolt in 6 A.D. when a census was taken (similar to the one in Luke 2:1) for the purpose of assessing the amount of taxes which should be collected. Judas believed that God alone was Israel’s rightful King and that no one should pay taxes to Caesar. He encouraged Jews not to register, and many that did had their houses burnt and their cattle stolen by his followers. Rome crushed this revolt; Judas was killed and his followers scattered. However, this same political position was later held by the party known as the “Zealots” who continued their revolts, eventually leading to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

In both of Gamaliel’s examples, the Romans killed the leader of the revolt, and the disciples scattered and the movement came to nothing. Gamaliel thought the same thing about Jesus Christ. Jesus was considered by some to have been in revolt against the Roman government, Rome put him to death, and his disciples will eventually be scattered and Christianity will die. There is one big difference however. Theudas and Judas were killed, ***but they did not rise up from the dead!*** Jesus

Christ was alive and working with His followers (Mark 16:20).

As a sidelight, it is fascinating to think that among the Lord's disciples were both a Zealot (who hated Rome) and a tax collector (who worked for Rome). One of the Lord's disciples was Simon, not Simon Peter, but Simon the Zealot (KJV-"Zelotes")-Luke 6:15. The Zealots were a zealous, enthusiastic party of Jews who were strongly opposed to Roman rule. These patriotic Jews wanted Israel to be a free nation, and they did not want to be dominated by the Romans. They wanted their country to be liberated and set free from the Roman yoke, free from Roman control. To achieve this end, they felt justified in using force. They would use violence, robbery, and even assassination to accomplish their goal of setting their nation free. They had a burning desire to accomplish their mission. They were passionate zealots dedicated to a free Israel. One of these zealots was named Simon. This man decided to follow Jesus Christ. He grew to realize that Christ came primarily to liberate the soul, not the society. Something much more terrible than Roman bondage was the bondage of sin (see John 8:32-36). Simon followed the Lord Jesus, the greatest Liberator of all! If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed (John 8:36).

Totally opposed to Simon in his political views was Matthew the publican (tax collector). On the one hand was Simon the Zealot, a hater of the Romans, and on the other hand was Matthew the publican, an "IRS" agent for the Romans. One wanted to destroy the Romans and the other worked for the Romans! Apart from Christ these two would have been at each other's throats. The Lord Jesus was able to bring these two men together, men who were on opposite ends of the political spectrum. He joined them together in the common cause of serving the Son of God. So also, in the local assembly of believers, there are people from all different backgrounds and viewpoints, yet wonderfully united together in one body, for God's glory.

Acts 5:38-39

Based on these examples, Gamaliel advised the Jewish leaders to leave the Christians alone. He made two main points: 1) If this movement is merely of men and not of God, then it will come to nothing all on its own, just like in the cases of Theudas and Judas. If God is not in it, it will not prosper. Thus we need not do anything because it will fizzle out on its own. Thus, just let it take its own course. 2) If this movement is truly of God, then you will never be able to overthrow it. It is great folly to try to fight against God.

Gamaliel's second point was wise. We must never fight against God because God is always on the winning side. Gamaliel, however, was not a believer, and the weight of his argument involved his first point. He did not believe that the movement was of God, nor did he believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and thus he was convinced that the movement would eventually have little influence or lasting effect.

In His providence, God used this man to set free the apostles, but his logic was flawed. The main flaw in the argument was Gamaliel's assumption that if a movement is not of God, then it will not grow or prosper. Ultimately this is true because any movement not of God will eventually come to naught, if not in this life, then certainly in the next. But Gamaliel failed to understand a basic fact of life, that oftentimes God allows the wicked to prosper. And there are times when movements which are not of God enjoy great growth in number and influence. We can think of the Mormon church, one of the fastest growing cults, or the Muslim faith which has been prospering for centuries and is threatening to dominate the world. Gamaliel was a pragmatist, thinking that if it works and

if it succeeds, then it must be of God. In spite of Gamaliel's flawed argument, it worked to the advantage of the apostles, and the Sanhedrin agreed to let them alone.²³

Acts 5:40

The Jewish leaders were in a tough spot, for if they had executed the apostles, this would not have been well received by many of the common people. In this sense they welcomed Gamaliel's advice as a way to extricate themselves out of their perplexing situation. But before letting them alone by releasing them, they beat them severely, probably with 39 lashes (compare 2 Cor. 11:24). In the law a guilty man was allowed to be given 40 stripes but no more. To play it safe, the Jews would give a maximum of 39. The Lord had predicted that His followers would receive this kind of harsh treatment (Matt. 10:17; compare Mark 10:38-39). This was the first time in Church history that Christians were physically abused. The suggestion has been made that Saul of Tarsus, the brilliant young disciples of Gamaliel, could possibly have been one of the men who administered the stripes to the disciples. This, however, is mere conjecture. We do know, without any doubt or conjecture, that Saul of Tarsus furiously persecuted the Church of God at a later point in time (1 Tim. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9).

The apostles were punished severely, but their only crime was preaching the gospel. The real guilt was on the part of their persecutors. These Jewish leaders commanded the apostles, once again, not to speak in the name of Jesus, and probably threatened them as in Acts 4:21.

Acts 5:41

These men, beaten and bruised, were filled with the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is joy, even in the midst of severe persecution, and peace in the midst of turmoil and trouble. Two artists set out to make a picture representing perfect peace. The first painted a canvas depicting a carefree lad sitting in a boat on a little placid lake without a ripple to disturb the surface. The other painted a raging waterfall with winds whipping the spray about. On a limb, overhanging the swirling water, a bird had built its nest, and sat peacefully brooding her eggs—safe from her predatory enemies—shielded and protected by the roaring falls. The second painting was more accurate. Real peace is remaining calm and cool in the midst of great trials and trouble (John 16:33; Matt. 8:23-27). The apostles rejoiced in tribulation. Peter himself knew the happy state a believer enjoys in the midst of being reproached for Christ's sake (1 Pet. 4:14). We cannot help but think of our Lord's words in Matthew 5:11-12, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." Compare also Luke 6:22-23. The apostles did not abandon their faith when faced with persecution as did the stony ground hearers (Matt. 13:20-21).

Acts 5:42

As was their habit, the apostles continued to disobey the commands of men so that they might obey God. "They might as well have ordered the sun not to shine as to command the disciples to keep

²³For a fascinating essay on Gamaliel and how his teachings serve as a warning to us today, see Special Topic #3 at the end of this chapter. The author is Dr. Peter Masters.

silent concerning the name of Jesus.”²⁴ The gospel message was boldly and fearlessly proclaimed on a daily basis, in the temple area where huge crowds would gather and in the local neighborhoods. God’s work was prospering and was not coming to naught (compare Acts 5:38). They preached Jesus Christ, and as Paul later wrote, “For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5). May each of us recognize our gospel responsibility and share the truth with joy, even when doing so might be fraught with difficulties. “For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16).

²⁴William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, p. 1600.

Special Topic #1

The Full Deity of the Angel of the Lord

(A major problem for Jehovah's Witnesses)

This study provides some help with respect to the erroneous teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses deny that the Lord Jesus Christ is God and they deny that He is Jehovah. They teach instead that He is a mere creature, an exalted angel that God created. They wrongly teach that He was the first creature that God created, and then God, through Him, created everything else.

Bible-believing Christians have recognized the angel of the LORD to be none other than the pre-incarnate Christ who appeared to men at certain times during the Old Testament period. As we shall see, the Bible clearly identifies the angel of the LORD as Jehovah and as God. This poses a serious problem for Jehovah's Witnesses and others who deny the deity of Christ and who deny the Trinity.

Jehovah's Witnesses cannot identify the angel of the LORD as Christ because He is identified as Jehovah, and they deny that Christ is Jehovah. But if He is not Christ, then who is He? He is said to be Jehovah but He is also said to be a separate Person from Jehovah because He is said to be Jehovah's messenger (the term "angel" means messenger). If He is Jehovah's messenger then He must be distinct from Jehovah, and yet the Bible also identifies Him as Jehovah! This apparent dilemma is not a problem for those who understand the triune nature of God.

Analogous to this is Christ's title as "the Word" in John 1:1-3. "The Word was with God" (John 1:1-2), thus He is distinct from God, and yet "the Word was God" (He is identified as God). As God's Son He is distinct from God the Father. But the Bible identifies God's Son as God (Heb. 1:8 etc.). So also Jehovah's messenger is distinct from Jehovah and yet Jehovah's messenger is also identified as Jehovah. This is a problem that Jehovah's Witnesses (and others who deny the Trinity) cannot solve.

Let us now consider the abundant evidence which identifies the angel of the LORD as God (or as Jehovah). The reader is encouraged to read through each of these passages thoughtfully.

1. Genesis 16:7-13

The angel of the LORD promised to do something that only God can do (see v. 10). Hagar knew that it was Jehovah who spoke to her (v. 13) and she identified the angel of the LORD as God: "Thou God seest me" (v. 13).

2. Genesis 21:17-20

The angel of God promised to do something only God can do (see v.18). This angel is identified as God (v. 19).

3. Genesis 22:15-18

The angel of Jehovah is speaking (verses 15-16) and yet verse 16 makes it clear that it is Jehovah

who is speaking (“saith the LORD”)! In verses 17-18 the angel of Jehovah promises to do what only God can do.

4. Genesis 31:11-13

The angel of God (v. 11) identifies Himself as God: “I am the God of Bethel” (v.13).

5. Exodus 3:2-7

The angel of Jehovah appeared to Moses out of the midst of a burning bush and identified Himself as God (verses 4 and 6) and as Jehovah (verses 4 and 7). See also Acts 7:30-32 where the angel of the Lord is identified as the Lord God.

6. Exodus 14:19-21

The angel of God does what only God can do (verses 19-20) and is identified with the glorious manifestation of God in the pillar of the cloud (verses 19-20). In verse 21 this angel is identified as “the LORD” (Jehovah).

7. Exodus 23:20-23

This passage makes it clear that Jehovah’s angel is much more than a mere angel. This angel is closely identified with God: Jehovah’s “name is in Him” (v. 21, “name” referring to Jehovah’s nature and character) and God’s people must “obey His voice” (v. 21). Indeed, He has the authority to “pardon your transgressions” or not to pardon them, and who can forgive sins but God alone? Notice that the angel is distinct from God and sent by God. The LORD said, “Behold, I send an angel before thee.” We are reminded of New Testament parallels as the Son was distinct from the Father and sent by the Father (John 3:17; etc.) and yet was equal to the Father (John 5:18; John 10:30).

8. Judges 2:1-3

The angel of Jehovah says things that only God can say. God is the One who brought them into the land which He swore to give unto their fathers (v. 1). God is the One who promised to never break His covenant (v. 1).

9. Judges 6:11-24

As you follow this passage, pay close attention to who is speaking to Gideon: in verse 12 the angel of Jehovah is speaking; in verse 14 Jehovah is speaking; in verse 16 Jehovah is speaking; in verse 20 the angel of God is speaking. Jehovah and the angel of Jehovah are one and the same.

10. Judges 13:3-23

Note especially verses 17-18. Manoah said to the angel of Jehovah, “What is Thy Name?” (v.17) and the angel of Jehovah said, “Why asketh thou thus after My Name, seeing it is secret?” The word “secret” may be translated “wonderful.” It is the same Hebrew word which is found in Isaiah 9:6 – “His Name shall be called wonderful.” In Isaiah 9:6 the term is used as a name of Christ who is also

called “the Mighty God.” The fact that Jehovah’s angel was God was certainly known by Manoah. After the angel of Jehovah appeared to him Manoah said, “We have seen God!” (v.22).

* * * * *

Another passage which could have been listed with the examples given above is 1 Chronicles 21:12-27. In this passage we learn that the angel of the LORD is a Person who is distinct from Jehovah (see verse 15 where Jehovah God sent the angel and spoke to the angel, and so also in verse 27). In verses 16-17 David sees the angel of the LORD and calls Him “God.”

There are two other passages where the angel of the LORD is obviously identified as God: 1) Psalm 34:7 (it is God who delivers His people, see Psalm 34:4,6,17,19 and it is God whom we are to fear, see Psalm 34:9,11) and 2) Isaiah 63:9 (an obvious reference to God).

See also C. I. Scofield’s excellent note summarizing what the Scripture teaches concerning the angel of the LORD (pages 289-290 in the New Scofield Bible, his note under Joshua 2:1).

Conclusion

The angel of the Jehovah is distinct from Jehovah and yet is identified as Jehovah. In these Old Testament passages the angel of the Lord is none other than the pre-incarnate Christ, the second Person of the triune Godhead. His full deity is consistently proclaimed in these passages. To Him be glory and honor both now and forever more!

Special Topic #2

Is a Person Saved by Obeying? (Is Obedience a Condition for Salvation?)

“And we are His witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Spirit, whom God hath given to **them that obey Him** (Acts 5:32).

“And being made perfect, He became the author of eternal salvation **unto all them that obey Him**” (Hebrews 5:9).

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but **he who does not obey the Son** will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36, NASB).

In Romans 1:5 we find the expression, “for obedience to [of] the faith.” The gospel message must be obeyed. The one condition of salvation is faith in Jesus Christ and faith alone. We are saved by “believing on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:31). It is important to remember that God commands men to be saved. “And this is His commandment, that we should believe on the Name of His Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 3:23). This is the first command that the sinner must obey. He must obey the gospel by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. “But now [God] commandeth all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Again we see that sinners are commanded to repent and believe the gospel.

“And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem was very greatly multiplied, and a great crowd of the priests **obeyed the faith.**” (Acts 6:7) Again, this verse speaks of obedience to the faith. “But they have not all **obeyed the glad tidings.** For Isaiah says, Lord, who has believed our report?” (Rom. 10:16) This is another verse that clearly equates “obeying” with “believing” (see also “faith” in Rom. 10:17). And the obedience that is spoken of in Romans 10:16 is clearly gospel obedience; it is obeying the glad tidings. A person is obedient to the gospel when he believes on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Consider also 1 Peter 2:7-8—“To you therefore who believe is the preciousness; but to the disobedient [*i.e., to those who refuse to believe*], the stone which the builders cast away as worthless, this is become head of the corner [*Ps. 118:22*], and a stone of stumbling and rock of offence [*referring to Jesus Christ, Jehovah-Messiah, Isa. 8:13-14, with respect to those who reject Him*]; who stumble at the word, being disobedient [*i.e., they stumble because of their disobedience, i.e., because of their refusal to believe*], to which [*stumbling*] also they have been appointed [*judicially appointed to stumble because of their refusal to believe*].”

If sinners refuse to repent and believe on Christ, then they have disobeyed the gospel: “In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of

our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 1:8 and see 1 Peter 4:17). Thus, rejecting the gospel is considered an act of disobedience, refusing to obey God’s command to repent and believe on Christ.

A believer’s life is characterized by obedience, by keeping Christ’s commands (1 John 2:3-5; John 14:21-24; John 10:27). This does not mean that believers obey perfectly (1 John 1:8-2:2). And some believers are more obedient than others. However, if a person’s life is characterized by disobedience, then it is very possible this person could be unsaved (1 John 2:3-4; John 14:24). Obedience characterizes what we are before God by grace as His children. We are begotten of God with a new nature, and are described in His Word as “obedient children” (1 Peter 1:14), as opposed to the unsaved who are described as “children of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2).

Obedience to Christ’s commands for daily living is not a requirement for salvation; it is a result of salvation. We do not obey in order to be saved; we obey because we are saved. Lordship salvation teachers tend to make obedience a requirement for salvation which distorts the true gospel of grace. Lordship salvation requirements (such as obedience, surrender, fulfilling the demands of discipleship) all focus upon what the sinner must do. When it comes to salvation by grace, the true focus should be upon the finished work of Christ and what He has done. See our study entitled *Do or Done?*²⁵ Salvation is based on God’s mercy, and it is not based on “works of righteousness which we have done” (Titus 3:5). “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Rom. 4:5).

How wonderful it is to rest on the all-sufficient, finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ! May our only boast be in the crucified One (1 Cor. 1:29-31)! ***“Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling!”*** No one is going to gain entrance to heaven and say, “Lord, I’m here because of how faithfully I obeyed Your commands.” No, our only plea is Jesus Christ and not our own righteousness:

“And may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God on the basis of faith” (Philippians 3:9).

²⁵See <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/helpseek/doorDONE.PDF>.

Beware of the Counsel of Gamaliel

From *The Sword & Trowel*, 2016, issue 1 by Dr Peter Masters

SOME PEOPLE seem to think that Gamaliel was the only wise man in the whole of the Bible! Whenever wisdom is needed to assess the latest strange idea or movement to penetrate the churches, we hear the famous ‘counsel of Gamaliel’ quoted.

And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God (*Acts 5.38-39*).

Some people seem to think that Gamaliel was the only wise man in the whole of the Bible! Whenever wisdom is needed to assess the latest strange idea or movement to penetrate the churches, we hear the famous ‘counsel of Gamaliel’ quoted. We heard it often, for example, in connection with the ‘Toronto blessing’.

We hear it especially when there is no scriptural support for something. When the rest of the Bible seems to say ‘No!’ – then the counsel of Gamaliel comes to the rescue.

Gamaliel is often preferred above Paul. If the apostle clearly condemns something, his word is pushed aside in favour of Gamaliel’s. But Paul is not alone in this. Gamaliel is even wiser than the Lord Jesus Christ, in the estimation of some. Where Christ says, ‘Beware of false prophets,’ Gamaliel says, ‘Leave them be; just watch and wait. Say and do nothing. And if they survive and flourish, they will prove to be from God.’

A liberal appeal

A famous historical appeal to the counsel of Gamaliel was made by a noted theological liberal in the USA named Harry Emerson Fosdick. In a sermon in 1922 (entitled, ‘Shall the Fundamentalists Win?’), Gamaliel is extolled as the personification of tolerance and magnanimity. Bible believers were urged to abandon their narrow and cantankerous unreasonableness and to adopt the great Gamaliel’s intellectual liberalism.

In recent decades, however, evangelicals too have been heard to press the counsel of Gamaliel as a reason for doing nothing about a range of trends, including contemporary music in worship, and charismatic excesses. The ministry of warning has been strangled and the people of God exposed to wild experimentation, all helped by the wisdom of Gamaliel.

Who, then, was Gamaliel? Was he a good and faithful and wise man? Did he speak from God? Is his celebrated counsel as wonderful as many seem to think?

Gamaliel was a leading Pharisee, a doctor of the law, and a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, who possessed great influence among the Jews between A.D. 20 and 58. He believed firmly that God’s favour was secured by virtue of being born a Jew, and by meticulous obedience to the ceremonial law. As a leading Pharisee, he would have been full of self-righteousness, and vehemently hostile to salvation by grace, through faith.

He was well aware of the teaching of John the Baptist that Christ was the Lamb of God, appointed to take away the sin of the world. He was also very familiar with the teaching of Christ, that neither Jewishness nor the ceremonial law could save the soul, and that individuals must repent and be born again by the power of God. These teachings he rejected. Indeed, he rejected the idea that Jesus Christ was any more than a man.

If Gamaliel had been affected by the ministry of Christ in the smallest degree, he was nevertheless among those who loved their position, and the esteem of men, far more than the praise of God. We must remember that he was one of those of whom Christ had said [John 8:44]: ‘Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do.’

Gamaliel’s intervention

It is true that when furious Jewish leaders were conferring about the execution of the apostles, Gamaliel intervened to save them. The older Protestant commentators, however, were not impressed. How remarkable, they said, that God would use a proud man with foolish reasoning to blunt the fury of a murderous Sanhedrin. The old writers gave the glory to God, and no credit to Gamaliel.

Calvin expressed astonishment at the intellectual shallowness of Gamaliel, saying, ‘His opinion is not what one might expect from a man of wisdom.’ If Gamaliel had been right, observed Calvin, ‘men must punish nobody and all crime must go uncorrected.’

Gamaliel’s ‘do-nothing’ counsel would certainly bring to an end all law enforcement if adopted by any State. Equally, there would be no discipline in the church. God repeatedly commands in His Word that right conduct should be approved and wrongdoing should be restrained. The Sanhedrin had a duty to establish the truth (using the Scriptures) and act

accordingly.

If the apostles were teaching correctly, they should have been supported and encouraged. If they were teaching falsehood, they should have been excluded from the Temple, and the people warned. Gamaliel and his colleagues should have sided either for or against the apostles. Gamaliel's counsel was a total abdication of responsibility. He said, in effect, 'Time will tell. In the meantime, it does not matter who they mislead.'

It must be admitted Gamaliel made two correct statements: first, that the work of men comes to nothing, and secondly, that the work of God cannot be overthrown. But he failed to note that the fall of the false may not take place for many centuries. Has Islam fallen yet, or Rome, or Hinduism? By Gamaliel's test, perhaps we should conclude that these movements are of God. But Gamaliel forgot that God does not judge the false immediately. Some false institutions will last until Christ destroys them at His coming.

True only at final judgement

The counsel of Gamaliel is true only when set in the context of eternity and the final judgement. In the meantime we have a duty to exercise discernment by the clear guidance of the Word.

To substitute the 'do-nothing' counsel of Gamaliel for discernment leads to one of two consequences, as we have noted. Either we fail to support something which is right, or we say and do nothing about something which is harmful and dishonouring to God. Gamaliel's counsel is always foolish, selfish, and hideously costly to the cause of Christ.

In the event, by doing nothing Gamaliel fought against God, because he failed to believe and support God's cause. He also failed to act when the apostles were flogged and charged not to speak in the name of the Lord.

Gamaliel's counsel of indecision was not due to his being a foolish man, for he was a renowned scholar and thinker. His reasoning was the product of unbelief and of fear. He was afraid of the reaction of the crowds in Jerusalem.

The other members of that hastily convened Jewish Council imagined that they possessed the social standing and moral authority to get away with whatever their murderous instincts dictated. Gamaliel knew better, realising that the death of the apostles could put the

Council itself at risk. So he warned, 'Take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do.'

The Temple police sent to arrest the apostles had not dared to use violence – 'for they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned' (verse 26). Even many unsaved people sympathised with the apostles on account of their power to heal.

History repeats itself. Just as self-preservation and self-interest was the motive behind Gamaliel's original counsel, so it is often the reason for its use today. Years ago the 'Toronto blessing' would arrive in a town where a weak and indecisive pastor led a fellowship of the Lord's people. 'If I oppose this,' he would reason, 'I may lose members in my church. Worse, the advocates of this new phenomenon may push me aside. On the other hand, if I encourage this new phenomenon too openly and too early, I will certainly meet with disapproval from my members.'

A Pharisee to the rescue

How will this unprotecting pastor handle such a dilemma? He will not find a text presenting the words of Christ, or of any apostle to justify an ambivalent, compromising, equivocal position. But, fortunately for the unworthy pastor, the words of a proud, self-righteous, unconverted Pharisee will come to his rescue. The counsel of Gamaliel is available for any pastor or elder interested only in self-preservation, and peace at any price.

Who are these who appeal so much to the counsel of Gamaliel? They are like him. They do not want the counsel of God, but a safe, easy and congenial solution. With the entire Bible open before them, nothing is of any value except for the words of an unregenerate Pharisee.

Gamaliel, to support his plea to do nothing, mentioned the cases of two rebel leaders who had been killed (apparently by the Roman authorities), with the result that their influence soon waned. The obvious implication was that Jesus of Nazareth had also been put to death by the Romans, and His following would doubtless die out in the same way. Gamaliel further warned that if the movement was from God, to kill the disciples would be to fight against Him.

Don't interfere!

So Gamaliel employed two arguments. Number One: If God is not behind the disciples, they will disperse without our interference. Number Two: If God is behind

them, we will be guilty of fighting Him. How frequently these arguments are heard today! If God is not behind the gimmicks, the worldliness, and the hysterical and occult practices coming into present-day Christianity, they will die out in time. Therefore, forget all pastoral responsibility and let them be.

On the other hand, if you speak against them, you may find you are quenching and blaspheming the work of the Spirit of the living God. Therefore keep off! Don't interfere! Stand on the touchline. See which way the wind blows. Do whatever is most advantageous and favorable to yourself, and see how matters unfold.

A test of pastors

The most useful purpose of the counsel of Gamaliel to present-day believers, is that it serves as an indication of the depth and reliability of those who function as pastors, leaders and Bible teachers. The use of the counsel of Gamaliel in defense of a 'do-nothing' or 'run-with-the-tide' approach to any new fad, is a sure sign of a person who has an inadequate respect for

Scripture as the authoritative judge of all matters of faith.

In other words, the counsel of Gamaliel may tell you much more about a pastor, than about how you should respond to the latest spiritual threats.

It is only to be expected that Gamaliel should be held in high regard by today's Bible commentators. If the present array of ecumenical new-evangelicals can endorse the pope, then why not Gamaliel? What is the difference? Both stand tenaciously for works as the basis of salvation, and both reject biblical, evangelical grace. Both uphold a mediatorial priesthood imagined to be vested in themselves, and both reject the simplicity which is in Christ. The similarities could be continued at length. Just as the pope is now widely accepted as a true man of faith, so Gamaliel, a Christ-rejecting, proud Pharisee, is regarded as a saintly protector of the apostles. (He is 'Saint Gamaliel' to Roman Catholics!) Fellow believers — be warned, and beware of the counsel of Gamaliel!



Peter's Wise Decision

But Peter and the other apostles answered and said:

“We ought to obey God rather than men.

(30) The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree.

(31) Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. (32) And we are His witnesses to these things, and so

also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those **who obey Him.**”

~Acts 5:29-32 NKJV