

# ON THE FENCE

Acts 5:29-41 NIV

Acts 5 29 thru 41 on the fence

Charles Spurgeon, one of England's best-known preachers, once told of sitting in a nice restaurant. As he ate he kept noticing a rather angry looking man across the dining room who scowled at him every time he looked his way. Finally Spurgeon decided to go over and speak to the man to see what his problem was. However, as he stood, the man did the same. He then realized that what he had been seeing was his own reflection in mirrors that lined the walls across the room.

Facing ourselves of a morning, we may not always like what we see in the mirror. Likewise, using God's Word like a mirror, we may not like the reflection, but what we see there is always the truth and always the best.

If we just glance in the mirror of a morning, we may miss something like pillow hair. Likewise, we may have rather quickly read a familiar passage many times, but the next reading may bring a new reflection. Our scripture for today is such a passage.

Luke introduces us to a member of the Sanhedrin who, at first glance appears to give some wise counsel. But let's look again.

Gamaliel was a leading Pharisee, a doctor of the law, and a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, who possessed great influence between A.D. 20 and 58. According to Acts 22:3, he was the Apostle Paul's mentor, before he was Paul; before Paul was saved.

As a Pharisee and teacher of the Law, he firmly believed that God's favor 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 inundated by self-righteousness and passionately hostile to salvation by grace through faith.

He would have been 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.

Like Nicodemus, who was also a member of the ruling council, who went to Jesus during the night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him," (John 3:2) Gamaliel would have been very familiar with the teaching of Christ, that the law could not save the soul, and that individuals

must repent and be born again by the power of God.

Although being well versed in the Scripture, and having a reputation of a wise and gifted teacher, he would have rejected the teachings of Jesus and his apostles. He would have rejected the idea that Jesus was any more than a man and hostile toward any of his students or fellow council members who thought otherwise.

Yet, when hearing the apostle's response to the high priest's accusations and the desire of his fellow council member's to put them to death, rather than voting in favor of such action, as you might think a staunch Pharisee would, he suggests a different approach.

After the temple guard escorts the apostles from the temple, they are brought before the Sanhedrin and confronted by the high priest. Luke records:

"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

<sup>29</sup> Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"<sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised Jesus from

the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. <sup>32</sup> We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

<sup>33</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. <sup>34</sup> But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. <sup>35</sup> Then he addressed them: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. <sup>36</sup> Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. <sup>37</sup> After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. <sup>38</sup> Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. <sup>39</sup> But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

<sup>40</sup> His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

<sup>41</sup> The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. <sup>42</sup> Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 5:28-41)

Wise counsel or not.... was this a well informed thought out plan or a spur of the moment self preservation attempt of peacemaking?

Gamaliel and the council's situation may have been like the preacher who was visiting various classes during the Sunday School Hour to see how they were doing. One Sunday he visited the class of 6th grade boys. They were talking about things in the O.T.

He listened for a while and then asked, “Who knows who knocked down the walls of Jericho?” Two boys answered, “Preacher, we don't know who, but we sure didn't do it.”

Surprised by their lack of Bible knowledge, he turned to the teacher and asked, “What do you think of that answer?” The teacher replied, “Well, I've known them since they were little, and they've always been honest. If they said they didn't do it, I believe them.”

Dismayed, he went out into the hallway and saw the chairman of the church board. He told him, “I was just in the 6th grade boys' class and asked who

knocked down the walls of Jericho. Two boys held up their hands and said, “We didn't do it, preacher.” And the teacher told me that if they said they didn't do it, he believed them.”

The chairman of the board interrupted and said, “Preacher, let's not fuss about who did what. We'll just fix the walls and pay for it out of the General Fund.”

Think it through or wander somewhere between lost and found...rather than dealing with the situation, let's be appeasers and compromisers; let's throw a quick fix at it and hope it goes away.

Gamaliel and the council made at least one critical error: who were Theudas and Judas?

In short, they were “Messiah-wannabe's”. Each of them came along during the time of Christ, and each tried to start his own religion or movement, and tried to overthrow the powers of Rome; to deliver Israel from the empire...but each of them failed.

Due to the oppression from Rome, everyone was looking for the Messiah, or a Messiah, in those days, and the hills of Palestine provided safe haven for men who would crown themselves as the Messiah.

But, does history record that these two “Messiah-wannabe's” preformed any signs and wonders like Jesus and the

apostles? Did either rise from the dead after being killed?

Let's go back to the statement Nicodemus made: "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him," (John 3:2)

How can you compare these two "Messiah-wannabe's" to Jesus? You have to totally ignore what God confirmed through signs and wonders.

You can't put Jesus on a list of great leaders or teachers for comparison purposes. Jesus is in a class all his own. He is not just another man who walked across the pages of history; he is the one controlling the course of history.

With Christmas just a few days away, here is something I want to impress upon your mind as you celebrate Messiah's birth: Jesus is the only baby who when born, was older than his mother and just as old as his Father.

And though he called himself 'Son of Man,' he has no equal born of man.

Critical error: "Messiah-wannabe's" do not compare to Jesus. This does not compute.

Critical error number two: if it is successful, it is of God. Gamalial, this wise teacher of Israel, claims that the determining factor of whether something

is of God or not is in the visible success of it...if it's a big success and lots of people follow it, it's of God...but if not, it's not of God.

What can we compare this to today? It sounds a little bit like, 'if it feels good, do it.' Or, how about this: there are things you don't do even if everybody is doing them – even if it looks successful. And there are things that you do even if nobody else is doing them- things that are true and right.

Pornography is a successful, lucrative business; but we are not going to do that here, I don't care how popular it is. Prostitution is said to be the oldest business. According to Gamaliel's reasoning, everybody should be doing it.

Gamaliel didn't ask if it was true or right...he said, let's just hop up here on the fence and watch, and see how it does. (But, he didn't advise that if it turned out to be successful, we – the teachers and overseers of Israel- should join.)

Critical error number one: faulty comparison. Critical error number two: faulty reasoning. Critical error number three: two wrongs don't make a right – faulty conclusion... Remain neutral.

Leave them alone – don't kill them – don't join them.

A little boy had a rough day. He irritated the baby sitter, and when dad and mom came home, he didn't do much

better. That night he prayed before going to bed; he prayed, 'God, make me a good boy; but not too good, just good enough so I don't get a whipping.'

Somewhere in the middle – not too good; not too bad. Remain neutral.

But, there is no neutrality when it comes to Christ. "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. (Matthew 12:30)

The devil never had a greater ally than this modern atmosphere in which everything is good and nothing is bad, and where black and white are smeared into grey. The truth is you are either saved or lost; going to heaven or going to hell; condemned or not condemned, for Christ or against Christ; love the church for which Christ died or hate the church for which Christ died; helping the cause of Christ or hindering the cause of Christ. There is no neutral ground.

A deaf man faithfully walked to a small church every Sunday. When asked why he did this, since he could not hear the sermon and the small church had no one to sign the message for him, he replied, "True, I can't hear the sermon, but I can let my neighbors know whose side I am on."

Gamaliel, this high ranking teacher and political leader, with a faulty comparison and by faulty reasoning persuaded his colleagues to remain neutral on Jesus and the church – sound familiar?

His reasoning sounded good and wise at first glance. But on closer examination, this could have been a political move for self preservation. Verse 34 may hold the key: **a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people.**

Don't rock the boat, guys. I want to keep my esteem among the people. If this was his motivation, then rather than a deep and wise teacher, Gamaliel was rather selfish and shallow. He was persuasive, but had no backbone, like this fellow who wrote to his girlfriend:

"Sweetheart, if this world was as hot as the Sahara desert, I would crawl on my knees through the burning sand to come to you. If the world would be like the Atlantic Ocean, I would swim through shark infested waters to come to you. I would fight the fiercest dragon to be by your side. I will see you on Thursday if it does not rain."

Great speech, but a little shallow.

Gamaliel did get one thing right; they were going to fight against God. The church would not be stopped.

The message of this new life has not always been popular or successful in the world's eyes, but for two-thousand years the message has been saving souls and changing lives.

What do you do with Jesus? You can't be neutral and ride the fence. You are **either for him or against him.**

Every morning when we look in the mirror, do we glance or take a hard look? What will we do with Jesus today? Will we give all or try to ride the fence?

Will you take a stand? Will you obey God rather than man? The church cannot be stopped. You have the upper hand.