**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-024. GAMALIEL'S COUNSEL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"38.* *Refrain from these men, and let them alone; for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: 39. But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God."*

*Acts 5:38-39*

The little that is known of Gamaliel seems to indicate just such a man as would be likely to have given the advice in the text. His was a character which, on its good side and by its admirers, would be described as prudent, wise, cautious and calm, tolerant, opposed to fanaticism and violence. His position as president of the Sanhedrin, his long experience, his Rabbinical training, his old age, and his knowledge that the national liberty depended on keeping things quiet, would be very likely to exaggerate such tendencies into what his enemies would describe as worldly shrewdness without a trace of enthusiasm, indifference to truth, and the like.

It is, of course, possible that he bases his counsel of letting the followers of Jesus alone, on the grounds which he adduces, because he knew that reasons more favourable to Christians would have had no weight with the Sanhedrin. Old Church traditions make him out to have been a Christian, and the earliest Christian romance, a very singular book, of which the main object was to blacken the Apostle Paul, roundly asserts that at the date of this advice he was secretly our brother, and that he remained in the Sanhedrin to further Christian views. But there seems not the slightest reason to suppose that. He lived and died a Jew, spared the sight of the destruction of Jerusalem which, according to his own canon in the text, would have proved that the system to which he had given his life was not of God; and the only relic of his wisdom is a prayer against Christian heretics.

It is remarkable that he should have given this advice; but two things occur to account for it. Thus far Christianity had been very emphatically the preaching of the Resurrection, a truth which the Pharisees believed and held as especially theirs in opposition to the Sadducees, and Gamaliel was old and worldly-wise enough to count all as his friends who were the enemies of his enemies. He was not very particular where he looked for allies, and rather shrank from helping Sadducees to punish men whose crime was that they preached through Jesus a resurrection from the dead.

Then the Jewish rulers had a very ticklish part to play. They were afraid of any popular shout which might bring down the avalanche of Roman power on them, and they were nervously anxious to keep things quiet. So Gamaliel did not wish to have any fuss made about these men, lest it should be supposed that another popular revolt was on foot; and he thought that to let them alone was the best way to reduce their importance. Perhaps, too, there was a secret hope in the old man's mind, which he scarcely ventured to look at and dared not speak, that here might be the beginning of a rising which had more promise in it than that abortive one under Theudas. He could not venture to say this, but perhaps it made him chary of voting for repression. He had no objection to let these poor Galileans fling away their lives in storming against the barrier of Rome. If they fail, it is but one more failure. If they succeed, he and his like will say that they have done well. But while the enterprise is too perilous for him to approve or be mixed up in it, he would let it have its chance.

Note that Gamaliel regards the whole movement as the probable germ of an uprising against Rome, as is seen from the parallels that he quotes. It is not as a religious teaching which is true or false, but as a political agitation, that he looks at Christianity.

It is to his credit that he stood calm and curbed the howling of the fanatics round him, and that he was the first and only Jewish authority who counselled abstinence from persecution.

It is interesting to compare him with Gallio, who had a glimpse of the true relation of the civil magistrate to religious opinion. Gamaliel has a glimpse of the truth of the impotence of material force against truth, how it is of a quick and spiritual essence, which cannot be cleaved in pieces with a sword, but lives on in spite of all. But while all this may be true, the advice on the whole is a low and bad one. It rests on false principles; it takes a false view of a man's duty; it is not wholly sincere; and it is one impossible to be carried out. It is singularly in accordance with many of the tendencies of this age, and with modes of thought and counsels of action which are in active operation amongst us to-day, and we may therefore criticise it now.

**I. Here is disbelief professing to be honest doubt. Gamaliel professes not to have materials for judging. If--if; was it a time for ifs? What was that Sanhedrin there for, but to try precisely such cases as these?**

They had had the works of Christ; miracles which they had investigated and could not disprove; a life which was its own witness; prophecies fulfilled; His own presence before their bar; the Resurrection and the Pentecost.

I am not saying whether these facts were enough to have convinced them, nor even whether the alleged miracles were true. All that I am concerned with is that, so far as we know, neither Gamaliel nor any of his tribe had ever made the slightest attempt to inquire into them, but had, without examination, complacently treated them as lies. All that body of evidence had been absolutely ignored. And now he is, with his ifs, posing as very calm and dispassionate.

So to-day it is fashionable to doubt, to hang up most of the Christian truths in the category of uncertainties.

**(a)** When that is the fashion, we need to be on our guard.

**(b)** If you doubt, have you ever taken the pains to examine?

**(c)** If you doubt, you are bound to go further, and either reach belief or rejection. Doubt is not the permanent condition for a man. The central truth of Christianity is either to be received or rejected.

**II. Here is disbelief masquerading as suspension of judgment.**

Gamaliel talked as if he did not know, or had not decided in his own mind, whether the disciples' claims for their Master were just or not. But the attitude of impartiality and hesitation was the cover of rooted unbelief. He speaks as if the alternative was that either this counsel and work was of man or of God. But he would have been nearer the truth if he had stated the antithesis--God or devil; a glorious truth or a hell-born lie. If Christ's work was not a revelation from above, it was certainly an emanation from beneath.

We sometimes hear disbelief, in our own days, talking in much the same fashion. Have we never listened to teachers who first of all prove to their own satisfaction that Jesus is a myth, that all the gospel story is unreliable, and all the gospel message a dream, and then turn round and overflow in praise of Him and in admiration of it? Browning's professor in Christmas Day first of all reduces the pearl of price to dust and ashes, and then Bids us, when we least expect it, Take back our faith--if it be not just whole, Yet a pearl indeed, as his tests affect it.

And that is very much the tone of not a few very superior persons to-day. But let us have one thing or the other--a Christ who was what He claimed to be, the Incarnate Word of God, who died for our sins and rose again for our justification; or a Galilean peasant who was either a visionary or an impostor, like Judas of Galilee and Theudas.

**III. Here is success turned into a criterion of truth.**

It is such, no doubt, in the long run, but not till then, and so till the end it is utterly false to argue that a thing is true because multitudes think it to be so. The very opposite is more nearly true. It in usually minorities who have been right.

Gamaliel laid down an immoral principle, which is only too popular to-day, in relation to religion and to much else.

**IV. Here is a selfish neutrality pretending to be judicial calmness.**

Even if it were true that success is a criterion, we have to help God to ensure the success of His truth. No doubt, taking sides is very inconvenient to a cool, tolerant man of the world. And it is difficult to be in a party without becoming a partisan. We know all the beauty of mild, tolerant wisdom, and that truth is usually shared between combatants, but the dangers of extremes and exaggeration must be faced, and perhaps these are better than the cool indifference of the eclectic, sitting apart, holding no form of creed, but contemplating all. It is not good for a man to stand aloof when his brethren are fighting.

In every age some great causes which are God's are pressing for decision. In many of them we may be disqualified for taking sides. But feel that you are bound to cast your influence on the side which conscience approves, and bound to settle which side that is, Deborah's fierce curse against Meroz because its people came not up to the help of the Lord against the mighty was deserved.

But the region in which such judicial calmness, which shrinks from taking its side, is most fatal and sadly common, is in regard to our own individual relation to Jesus, and in regard to the establishment of His kingdom among men.

He that is not with Me is against Me. Neutrality is opposition. Not to gather with Him is to scatter. Not to choose Him is to reject Him.

Gamaliel had a strange notion of what constituted refraining from these men and letting them alone, and he betrayed his real position and opposition by his final counsel to scourge them, before letting them go. That is what the world's neutrality comes to.

How poor a figure this politic ecclesiastic, mostly anxious not to commit himself, ready to let whoever would risk a struggle with Rome, so that he kept out of the fray and survived to profit by it, cuts beside the disciples, who had chosen their side, had done with ifs, and went away from the Council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name! Who would not rather be Peter or John with their bleeding backs than Gamaliel, sitting soft in his presidential chair, and too cautious to commit himself to an opinion whether the name of Jesus was that of a prophet or a pretender?