

How Do We Know if the Gospel is from Men or from God?

Acts 5:17-42

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So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God! - Acts 5:38-39, ESV

One of the greatest rabbis in the history of Judaism was Gamaliel, mentioned in today's passage from Acts 5. Gamaliel was held in honor by all of the Jewish leaders on the Sanhedrin, which is why they followed his advice in today's passage, even though most of them felt passionately that they should have severely punished the apostles for continuing to speak to the people in the Temple about Jesus.

Gamaliel's advice is wise counsel for anyone considering the claims of Jesus today. Jesus was not the only man to claim to be the Messiah in first-century Israel. He was not the only one to have disciples who proclaimed His Messiahship. In Acts 5, Gamaliel mentions Theudas and Judas the Galilean, but several others could be mentioned, too, including Judas the Son of Hezakiah and Simon of Peraea. What do these other men all have in common? You've probably never heard of any of them! In other words, none of the other Messianic candidates amounted to anything.

Gamaliel was right: If the claim to be the Messiah is an undertaking of man, it amounts to nothing. Now, some people could counter that Muhammed's claims to be the last prophet have stood the test of time, but Muhammed had a large army at his disposal which forcibly advanced his claims, establishing a large political empire before his death.

By contrast, Jesus commanded no army, and neither did the apostles. In fact, Christianity was an illegal religion with no political recognition or support whatsoever for almost 300 years - no church buildings, no official status, nothing. Yet it spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, claiming millions of followers from India to Ethiopia to Spain.

So, how many poor and obscure men can claim to be the Messiah and see a group of perhaps 120 disciples grow to 5-8 million in less than 300 years without any political or military support at all? This is simply impossible and has never been done in the history of the world by anyone, except by Jesus of Nazareth.

Gamaliel was right: One of the best tests of the truth of the claims of the apostles regarding Jesus is the fact that they were received widely, establishing churches on three continents within 30-40 years of the life of Jesus, and have only spread from there for the past 2,000 years.

Even today, Christianity does not have much government backing or any real political empire, and yet it has grown from 600 million followers to over 2.2 billion followers over the past 100 years. Islam is also growing quickly, but it has governments and armies all over the world promoting and advancing it. The church has only the word of God preached and the worship of God practiced.