

## The Words of Gamaliel Do Not Warrant Toleration of False Religion

Acts 5:38-39; 2 Corinthians 13:8

January 9, 2011

Rev. Greg L. Price

In the previous sermon, we considered how Christian tolerationists appeal to the conscience of man as a moral basis for the official toleration and protection of all false religion, heresy, and blasphemy within a nation. You will recall that an appeal is often made by many Christians to Romans 14 as a warrant for an alleged “liberty of conscience” (or actually, a *pretended* liberty of conscience) in religious matters within the civil realm. But, dear ones, it cannot be maintained that the conscience of man has some inherent liberty, warrant, or lawful authority given to it by God to do what God Himself forbids in His Moral Law (“For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth” 2 Corinthians 13:8). The conscience of man is only as reliable in its testimony and judgment as it is guided by the Moral Law of God, not when it is free to practice whatever it judges to be right for that individual.

It is objected by Christian tolerationists that if magistrates legislate, enforce, and judge in matters of religion, then magistrates (rather than God) will become the lords of our faith.

That certainly **may** be true, **if** magistrates legislate, enforce, and judge in matters of religion what is contrary to God’s Moral Law, AND IF WE OBEY THEM when they do so. For then we obey man, rather than God; and in doing so, we make man the lord of our conscience. However, the same may be said in regard to ministers, rabbis, imams, priests, and popes as well. If they legislate, enforce, and judge in matters of religion what is contrary to God’s Moral Law, and if we obey them, we likewise obey man, rather than God; and we likewise make man in that case the lord of our conscience. But if magistrates or ministers legislate, enforce, and judge in matters of religion what is taught in the Moral Law of God (as summarized in the Ten Commandments), then we acknowledge that it is not the magistrate or minister who is the lord of our conscience, but God who is the lord of the conscience (whose minister the faithful magistrate and faithful minister are).

I ask, Did God Himself command magistrates who obeyed Him to become the lords of men’s consciences (whether with Israel’s magistrates, Deuteronomy 13:5; Deuteronomy 17:2-7—or with Gentile magistrates, Psalm 2:10-12; Romans 13:4)? One must either rightly confess that magistrates who legislate, enforce, and judge in matters of religion in accordance with God’s Moral Law do not become lords of men’s consciences, or one must blasphemously propose that God (who alone is lord of the conscience) contradicts Himself and denies Himself in commanding magistrates to become lords of men’s consciences when He commands them to legislate, enforce, and judge in matters of religion. Thus I submit, dear ones, that magistrates who legislate, enforce, and judge in matters of religion in accordance with the Moral Law of God do not assume to themselves the Divine title of “lords of men’s conscience”; to the contrary, they humbly acknowledge that such magistrates are “ministers of God to thee for good” (Romans 13:4).

This Lord’s Day we shall examine another text that has been used by Christian tolerationists to allege the official toleration of all religions within a nation. Our main points for the sermon today are the following: (1) The Words of Gamaliel to Tolerate the Teaching of the Apostles Is Not a Divine Warrant for an Official Toleration of All Religions (Acts 5:38-39); (2) A Further Look at the Religious Art and Architecture of National Monuments and Buildings.

### I. The Words of Gamaliel to Tolerate the Teaching of the Apostles Is Not a Divine Warrant For an

## **Official Toleration of All Religions (Acts 5:38,39).**

A. As we approach our text this Lord's Day, it should be noted that Luke was the human author who penned this early history of the Christian Church by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, providing a summary of important events in the Apostolic Church from the ascension of Christ until the first imprisonment of Paul in Rome (cp. Acts 1:1 with Luke 1:1). Luke was one of Paul's missionary associates according to the "we" passages beginning in Acts 16:10ff, and was a physician, according to Colossians 4:14.

1. In summarizing some of the events that brought the apostles into conflict with the Jewish leadership in the Sanhedrin (which was the Jewish Supreme Court), Luke describes the first encounter in Acts 4 where Peter and John are arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin for healing and preaching in the name of Jesus. The Sanhedrin threatened them and commanded them not to teach in the name of Jesus anymore, to which the apostles replied, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20). In other words, the apostles in effect declared, "You judge whether you are the lord of our conscience or whether God alone is lord of our conscience."

2. A second encounter with the Sanhedrin occurs in Acts 5, where once again due to the healing and preaching in Christ's name, the apostles are arrested, then miraculously delivered from prison, then arrested again, and finally brought before the Sanhedrin again. The apostles are reminded that they were commanded not to teach in the name of Jesus, to which they reply in similar words, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Why ought they to obey God rather than men? Because God alone is lord of the conscience; and when the unlawful authority and commandments of men contradict the absolute authority and holy commandments of God (as found in His Moral Law) and would thus require us to sin against God, we are bound to obey God rather than men. Dear ones, we are bound to obey God, and not any creature (including our conscience when it leads us from obedience to God's Moral Law). This is not only applicable to the civil magistrate, but also to the minister and elder within the church. For whenever ministers and elders authorize in worship acts that are not warranted by God in Scripture (whether the use of uninspired hymns, or the use of musical instruments, or the celebration of holy days that have not been instituted as holy days by God in the Bible), these ministers and elders are acting as lords of the conscience over the people. For, dear ones, there is no Divine warrant for such acts of worship in the New Covenant worship authorized by Christ, the Head of the Church.

B. This brings us to the well-known words of Gamaliel as found in our text (Acts 5:38-39). Rabbi Gamaliel was an esteemed doctor of the law, a Pharisee (Acts 5:34), and was also Paul's rabbinical teacher (Acts 22:3). He was a very pragmatic ruler, for seeing that the Sanhedrin was faced with a dilemma—whether to slay the apostles and risk a riot by the people in Jerusalem, or whether to let the apostles off the hook altogether and make their authority a mockery before the people—Gamaliel proposes a middle ground for the time being that would avoid either of those two extremes.

1. Gamaliel cites two historical instances in which men (namely Theudas and Judas) on separate occasions led rebellions in opposition to the civil and religious authorities in Israel. In both cases, the rebellions were put down, and their followers were scattered so as not to cause any further disturbance (Acts 5:36-37).

2. Having cited these two historical cases, Gamaliel proceeds to present his mediating position on how the Sanhedrin ought to handle the apostles of Jesus Christ (Acts 5:38-39).

C. Christian tolerationists have used this passage of Scripture to promote the view that Gamaliel was wisely exercising the proper religious toleration that civil authorities should maintain toward those practicing different religious views. Gamaliel proposed that the Sanhedrin not put the apostles to death, but

rather let God (in effect) decide if the religion of the apostles was heretical or orthodox by waiting to see whether their religion would prosper or whether it would come to nothing. In other words, the Christian tolerationist would propose (using Gamaliel as biblical warrant) that magistrates (who are not infallible in their religious judgments) should tolerate all religions and leave it to God to prosper them or to destroy them according to His own providential will.

D. There are significant problems with looking to Gamaliel's words as biblical warrant for the official toleration of all religions by the civil magistrate.

1. First, Gamaliel is not speaking as a faithful Christian magistrate who desires to defend the true religion of biblical Christianity. He is speaking as a Jewish Pharisee who pragmatically wants to merely avoid a riot among the people (which would likely then bring the Romans in mass into Israel to put down the riot). The counsel of pragmatic Gamaliel in that particular instance may have been used by God to preserve the lives of the apostles, but that does not mean that his counsel is a moral standard for all magistrates to follow. The lie of Jacob in deceiving his father, Isaac, was the means in God's providence of passing the birthright on to Jacob (whom God had chosen to receive the birthright even before his birth), but Jacob's lie was still sin, and it does not provide a moral standard for all Christians to follow in securing their inheritance from their parents. God uses all things (even sinful things) to glorify His justice or to glorify His mercy, but that does not warrant man to sin against God with impunity ("Let us do evil that good may come?" Paul asks, and then Paul states the end of all who practice such an unethical standard, "whose damnation is just" Romans 3:8).

2. Second, if the reason why magistrates are to practice religious toleration is because they are not infallible in their moral judgment of such things (as is proposed by Christian tolerationists), why does not that same lack of infallibility in the moral judgment of magistrates also provide warrant for their toleration of abortion, unjust wars, adulterous relationships, no-fault divorces, and same-sex marriages? Are magistrates only fallible and capable of erring in religious matters, but infallible and incapable of erring in civil matters? Does not the Moral Law of God speak with the same authority to religious matters (in Commandments 1-4 of the 10 Commandments) as it does to civil matters (in Commandments 5-10)? And Commandments 1-4 are just as clear in their meaning as are Commandments 5-10, so why would there be more confusion in religious matters for the civil magistrate than in civil matters? I submit that the founding fathers of America were just as pragmatic (not conscientious) as Gamaliel in their official toleration of all religions, heresies, and blasphemies—they too wanted to prevent a riot among the people and to preserve an unholy union based upon religious pluralism.

3. Third, if the proposal of Gamaliel is warrant for a toleration of all religions, heresies, and blasphemies in the State, then it is likewise warrant for a toleration of all religions, heresies, and blasphemies in the Church. For the Jewish Sanhedrin was the Supreme Court in matters related not only to the civil realm, but also in matters related to the ecclesiastical realm. And yet Christian tolerationists are not known for promoting the idea that all religions, all heresies, and all blasphemies ought to be tolerated in each and every particular Church. And yet if the Christian tolerationist desires to appeal Acts 5:38-39, there is equal warrant to conclude from the passage a religious toleration of all religions within the Church as there is for a religious toleration of all religions within the State; for the Sanhedrin was a civil as well as an ecclesiastical court.

4. Fourth, if the Christian tolerationist looks to this passage as warrant for toleration of all religions within a nation, and therefore the establishment of no particular religion within a nation (as is practiced here in the United States), then the Christian tolerationist must tip-toe past the glaring historical fact that Israel at the time of the apostles had an established religion: namely, the Jewish religion which is why the apostles met with such hostility from the Jewish Sanhedrin. Thus, if the Christian tolerationist would appeal to Acts 5:38-39 as warrant for religious toleration, it must also promote that each nation ought to have an established, state-sponsored and state-supported religion (even if it makes an occasional religious exception

here and there).

5. Fifth, if the Christian tolerationist would appeal to Acts 5 for its view of religious toleration, he must also believe that the magistrate may use beatings as punishment against those whose religious practices are tolerated as an exception in a particular instance. For immediately after Gamaliel offers his mediating view to the Sanhedrin, we read these words in Acts 5:40: “And to him [i.e. Gamaliel—GLP] they agreed: and when they had **beaten them** [i.e. the apostles—GLP], they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.” Thus, when it comes down to it, the Christian tolerationist cannot in good conscience appeal to the text in Acts 5 as biblical warrant for the toleration of all religions, heresies, and blasphemies. For this passage in Acts 5 proves far more than the Christian tolerationist cares to acknowledge with his toleration of all religions.

6. As indicated above, dear ones, it is not God’s providence that is to guide either magistrate or minister in ruling on behalf of God. Otherwise, whenever evil should prosper in a nation or heresy should prosper in a church (rather than righteousness and truth), the magistrate and minister would be prevented by Gamaliel’s words from restraining the spread of that evil, but would rather have to allow evil and heresy to run its course in God’s providence (because we may find ourselves to be fighting against God). The view of Gamaliel would lead the magistrate and the minister to always take a “wait and see what happens” approach to the very evils (that are contrary to God’s Moral Law) for which the magistrate was given the sword by God to restrain (Romans 13:4), and the very sins and heresies (that are contrary to God’s Moral Law) for which minister and elder were given the keys of the kingdom by Christ to restrain (1 Corinthians 5:5-7). To the contrary, dear ones, the Triune God of the Bible has revealed His will for nations and churches in His Moral Law by which all magistrates and all ministers are to rule (Psalm 2:10-13; Isaiah 8:20; Romans 13:4; 1 Timothy 1:9-10; 2 Timothy 3:16,17).

## II. A Further Look at the Religious Art and Architecture of National Monuments and Buildings.

A. Let’s continue our brief tour of national monuments and buildings by considering one more religious feature of the Supreme Court Building.

1. From the official website for the Supreme Court of the United States we read,

The main entrance to the Supreme Court Building is on the west side, facing the United States Capitol. A few low steps lead up to the 252-foot-wide oval plaza in front of the building. Flanking these steps is a pair of marble candelabra with carved panels on their square bases depicting: **Justice** holding sword and scales, and **The Three Fates**, weaving the thread of life.

2. From the Information Sheet on the official website of the Supreme Court of the United States an explanation is given of the goddess Justice that is found at the entrance of the Supreme Court Building:

Portraying Justice as a female figure dates back to depictions of Themis and Justitia in ancient mythology. Themis, known for her clear-sightedness, was the Greek Goddess of Justice and Law.

Thus, the pagan Greek and Roman goddess of Justice greets you as you enter the Supreme Court Building.

3. What are “the three fates” that are depicted “weaving the thread of life”? They are Greek mythological characters: CLOTHO who spins the Thread of Life, LACHESIS who allots the length of the yarn of life, and ATROPOS who snips the yarn of life. These images and their meanings are hardly Christian in depicting the United States as a Christian nation.

B. Let's take a brief tour of the United States Capitol Building.

1. And what do we find standing in the entrance of the United States Capitol building? We find a statute tribute to Mars, the Roman god of war and agriculture. Most of these themes would certainly be appropriate in the Roman Pantheon, but not as consistent themes of a Christian nation.

2. Within the United States Capitol, there are clearly some Christian themes in the paintings one will find in the Capitol Building. For example, there is a stained glass window of George Washington praying in the chapel in the United States Capitol. There is also a painting of Pocahontas' Christian baptism.

3. But there is also a painting of the Roman goddess of War in the Senate side of the Capitol Building.

4. As one looks up from the Capitol rotunda to the vaulted dome high above the floor, one will see a painting in the dome entitled, *The Apotheosis of Washington*. *The Apotheosis of Washington* depicts George Washington's ascension into heaven and his becoming a god (which is what *apotheosis* means in Greek). Washington is draped in purple, a royal color, with a rainbow arch at his feet, flanked by the goddess Victory to his left and the goddess Liberty to his right. Surrounding Washington and the two goddesses, are six scenes lining the perimeter of the painting.

a. **War.** The goddess Freedom is directly below Washington in the personification of War.

b. **Science.** Minerva, the Roman goddess of crafts and wisdom, is portrayed with helmet and spear.

c. **Marine.** This scene shows Neptune, the Roman sea-god, with trident and crown of seaweed riding in a shell chariot drawn by sea horses. The goddess, Venus, is also depicted in this scene.

d. **Commerce.** Mercury, the Roman god of commerce is displayed in this scene.

e. **Mechanics.** Vulcan, the Roman god of fire and the forge is pictured in this scene.

f. **Agriculture.** Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture is the central figure in this scene.

5. And what do we find on the top of the United States Capitol Building? We find the pagan statue of the goddess, Freedom! The twelve stars of the zodiac surround the headdress of the goddess, Freedom, which is an ancient pagan astrological concept.

C. As you tour the Statue of Liberty, you are once again confronted with the Roman goddess, Liberty, in all of her glory holding forth her torch as a light to the peoples of the world to come to her for freedom.

And one could continue with all of the monuments and paintings to idolatry that join hands with Christian themes to form the national religion of religious polytheism. Wherever there is a biblical or Christian theme to a portrait, sculpture, or statue, there is not far away a pagan, or another religious symbol that reveals time and time again that this nation was not founded as a distinctly Christian nation. Dear ones, a Christian nation does not in its national symbols look like the Roman pantheon. A Christian nation rather removes all such monuments to idolatry as national symbols and looks to the First Commandment ("Thou shalt have no other gods before me") rather than looking to the First Amendment (in its toleration of false religion).

Copyright 2011 Greg L. Price.