***The Gamaliel Principle Revisited***

**by The Right Reverend K.L. Ackerman, SSC, DD**

**34But a Pharisee in the council named Gama'li-el, a teacher of the law, held in honor by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a while. 35And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you do with these men. 36For before these days Theu'das arose, giving himself out to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was slain and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. 37After him Judas the Galilean arose in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. 38So 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 men, it will fail; 39but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"**

**(Acts 5: 34-39)**

In the course of Church History, Rabbi Gamaliel has been credited with the term “The Gamaliel Principle.” But, is this a subjective or objective principle as it relates to Christianity as a world- wide reality, it is objective Truth. However, as a general principle of assessment, could it possibly be subjective? Biblical proof texting and the incorporation of texts out of context have caused chaos for centuries. Contemporary debates very often utilize Biblical circumstances and events to prove or disprove innovations.

In the circumstances surrounding the question of whether or not to persecute and/or silence the Holy Apostles in the Acts of the Apostles account, an expert witness, highly respected by the Jewish people, with a remarkable pedigree, namely (Rabbi) Gamaliel (the elder) was asked to offer his opinion and advice regarding what to do with these men.  His advice is often reduced to what is commonly called “The Gamaliel Principle” often rendered as “If it is of men it will fail; if it is of God it will prosper.” In fact, the phrase from Acts 39, “you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God” is often forgotten, since it is not a sound byte. Sadly, historically speaking, this principle - objective in presentation becomes subjective, as the reader must now determine if their position is of God or not. But with this principle comes a question: is the size of a movement indicative of God’s favor? One can look at a variety of movements since Gamaliel uttered these words, and can see that Heresies still abound, some world religions are growing, and unity becomes increasingly fragile. Is it possible to ask the questions: if a movement is of God, will it always be popular, will it always unite people, will it become firmly established? Certainly, to answer those questions one must have the long view rather than the short view. For many people today who are convinced that instantaneous answers are essential and should be texted or tweeted within the hour, history is very frustrating.  I was recently told by a young priest that he was very tired of waiting for certain ecclesial decisions since he has “been in the battle” for thirty years. Thirty years - a lifetime of waiting for some, I suppose. A cursory review of the Hymn, “A mighty fortress is our God” may give us some perspective on our understanding of time, and the Creator of time’s understanding.

The Church for the last five decades has changed remarkably. This is in part due to the culture, but the dilemma will always be, are cultural innovations normative or extraordinary? Should cultural innovations be considered to be a mandate to the Church?

The ordination of women into the threefold ministry of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church is an innovation. Objectively speaking, no matter how one approaches the subject, the fact remains that it is measured in decades. Protestant churches have had female ordination for a longer period of time, recognizing the fact that these Churches generally have one order of Ministry demonstrated in a per saltum fashion. Furthermore, such terms as “alter Christus,” and “Ikon of Christ” are not generally a part of their understanding of Holy Orders. This does not negate the value of that type of ordained ministry, but it is a different understanding, reflecting a view that was generally not espoused until four- and one-half centuries ago.

This, of course, leads us to a dilemma. Has the ordination of women objectively improved the nature of Holy Orders or not? Objective measurements are terribly difficult to apply due to societal changes, and socio-demographic shifts. Subjectively speaking, the proponents of the innovation will point to the accomplishments of holy women. One must concur that there has never been any question about the accomplishments of holy women - Church history, in particular can testify to that wonderful reality. The question is not proficiency, holiness, or success, but rather the presenting question, once again subjective in nature is, has this innovation contributed to greater Church unity, the cessation of division and unanimity?

We must now return to Gamaliel. In the end, who determines if the greater good has been accomplished when innovations are institutionalized? Should it be measured numerically, or should the mere ongoing existence of an innovation for several decades be the conclusion to the principle? Or should a democratic form of analysis be applied that produces laws of enforcement? There will be no tweets to these questions.