



The Work of Man or the Work of God

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

Acts 5:38 & 39

As witnesses of the gospel which the Lord had entrusted to them, the apostles were speaking of God and His Word, but the effect of their preaching was entirely different from that on the day of Pentecost. There three thousand people were pricked in the heart. Here, we read, they were cut to the heart or sawed through, which most likely indicates a mixture of conscious guilt with revengeful wrath. They took counsel, that is, consulted, and intended to slay them. The enmity, especially of the Sadducees, was great.

Then one arose, whose name was Gamaliel. He was an old and highly respected man from the tribe of Manasseh, a Pharisee, a doctor and teacher of the law. He spoke, *"I say unto you"*, which indicates earnestness, *"refrain from these men and let them alone, for if this counsel or this work be of men,"* that is, of human origin, *"then it will come to naught,"* it will fall apart. Gamaliel mentions some examples from history. He speaks of Theudas, a leader of the movement in Judea, who saw himself as a new Joshua who would lead his men by God's power across the Jordan into the holy land; but his work came to naught. He was killed by the Romans. Then Gamaliel mentions Judas of Galilee, a founder of the sect of the zealots, a Jewish leader who led a revolt against the Romans. His efforts also came to naught. The work of man in these cases can be characterized by:

- a) self-exaltation, as indicated by Theudas thinking that he was something special himself, or
- b) zeal, human power, but without submission to God's judgments upon the people.

Gamaliel spoke of the work of man. This will come to naught. What a solemn warning out of the mouth of this teacher! We do not know for sure why he spoke these words, or what his motives were. But one thing we know, his warning has something to say to us also. How essential it is to know whether a work is from man or from God! There are some characteristics of *the work of man*.

- 1) The work of man comes from man. It is as the web of the spider, which comes from its own body. Man may spin a web. It may look beautiful, a web of his own conversion and hope, but it is the work of man.
- 2) This work can look quite similar to the work of God. It may be hard to discern, and only the end will reveal the difference. We can be an almost Christian.
- 3) This human work may grow quickly. It is as the house of the foolish builder. It was soon complete, but it was upon the wrong foundation.
- 4) Human work is based on selfish principles. It seeks its own interest. Its goal is self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency. The motive is self. The actions are promotions of themselves or their own happiness.
- 5) This human work is done by the power of man and human wisdom. It may seem to be impressive, as the tower of Babel seemed to be, but it will fail.

- 6) Human work gives the honor to man, exalts man and ends in man. In this work there is no humility, no seeking of the glory of God. We find such a clear example of the work of man in the parable of the wise and foolish builder.

Justus Vermeer, a Dutch forefather, mentions these marks of the foolish builder, the work of man.

- 1) He may delight to hear the Word of God and have a desire to follow the Lord's best servants as we read of Herod in Mark 6:20.
- 2) There may be a confessing of the truth, an enjoyment of ecclesiastical privileges, and even a fervent battle for the truth.
- 3) There may be much knowledge of the Word of God and rich gifts and talents.
- 4) There may also be a deep insight into the theological truths and an ability to speak about them.
- 5) There may be an awakened conscience and an outward humiliation, as Saul and Ahab had.
- 6) A conviction of guilt may also be evident, as Esau had, but never an inclination of the heart.
- 7) An improvement may also be seen in the way of life and a striving to be saved.
- 8) There may also be the approval of man, so that even God's people and God's servants have good thoughts of us.
- 9) There may even be seen a willingness to undergo tribulations and persecutions, suffering, and even dying for the truth. We read of that in 1 Corinthians 13:3.
- 10) Even heavenly gifts may be tasted and there may be an enlightenment which is temporary, Hebrews 6:4.

With all these things the heart remains unrenewed. There is no desire for forgiveness and cleansing in the blood of Christ, no real hunger and thirst for Him, but a boasting in ourselves, resting on knowledge, a confession, or activities. It never becomes a lost case before God.

However, Gamaliel also spoke of the work of God. The work of God also has its characteristics.

- 1) It comes from heaven, it is from God. The apostles have spoken of this work as the work of a Triune God. They speak of the God of our fathers, who raised up Jesus. The work of God comes forth from God's counsel, from His good pleasure, from His eternal thoughts of peace. They also spoke of the work of the Son who was slain by the Jews, but whom God has exalted to be a prince and a Savior. This is the work of God, to save lost sinners, to give them repentance and forgiveness of sins. The work of God has been manifested in the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus Christ. They also spoke of the work of the Holy Ghost. How necessary this is. The Holy Ghost not only gives words to speak but then He also applies that word to our heart. The work of a Triune God is proclaimed by them.
- 2) The work of God is free and sovereign. It is as the wind which bloweth where it listeth.
- 3) It is irresistible and no one will be able to prohibit the advance and the fulfillment of it.
- 4) The work of God brings a man low before God. It gives humility, it humbles, breaks, and bruises man. It makes strong hearts to become as wax in the hand of the Lord. It causes a weeping and grieving about our sins.
- 5) The work of God is not done by human might nor by human power but by the power of the Spirit. (Zechariah 4:6).
- 6) The work of God is always according to the Word of God and by His Word. It is a scriptural work The Word of God is a power unto salvation.

- 7) This work has a view to the honor and glory of God. It ends in Him, self is left out and it will be, *"It is through Thee, through Thee alone, for the sake of Thy good pleasure"*.

This work of God we see in the wise builder in the same parable. Justus Vermeer gave these marks of the work of the wise builder.

- 1) He is born again. He is called internally and has received true faith.
- 2) He is a student in the school of free grace and is taught by the Lord. *"All thy children shall be taught of the Lord"* (Isaiah 54:13).
- 3) A wise builder is cautious and careful and is afraid to deceive himself He is afraid of his own deceitful and sinful heart and the power of the enemies.
- 4) He is humble and afraid of his own pride. He doesn't trust in himself and yet he may receive courage in God.
- 5) He is submissive to the ways of God and surrenders to His leadings and trusts in Him.
- 6) He is a fervent beggar at the throne of God's grace. He is a poor and needy one.

Such a wise builder has a firm resolution that he can build the house only upon the rock. He breaks down everything that stands in the way. He removes all obstacles. He digs and goes deeper. He has a bowing life, and the nearer he comes to the foundation, the lower thoughts he has of himself. He has no rest until he has found that one Good Foundation which becomes so utterly precious. All other grounds, strengths, and coverings are taken away.

The wise builder builds his house upon the rock, and the bricks are joined together with the cement of love. He is bound to the Word of God as his only rule and guide. He often asks for light and truth to build in the right way and not to deceive himself. "Oh send out Thy light and Thy truth." He is a doer of the word, working at the building; not just a hearer, but a doer. The more complete the house becomes, the more he will die to everything of himself and will live out of Him who is the foundation of his house, Jesus Christ.

Gamaliel spoke of the work of man and of the work of God. The work of God is a most beautiful and perfect work, but it will be attacked. Here we see the disciples, that little church of Pentecost, surrounded by the bigotry of Pharisaic Judaism, who cling with passionate obstinacy to the traditions of their fathers. They are also surrounded by the hard cold skepticism of the Sadducees who deny the existence of anything that cannot be seen or touched. And, in the wider circle of the outside world, there is the iron heathenism of Rome, the imperial tyranny of the Caesar, the military force and despotism of the sword. In that heathen world there is sensuality and idolatry. There are philosophies most adverse to the cross of Christ.

How and where could the gospel make its way? Would it not die soon in the upper room where it was born? No, Gamaliel said that the work of man would come to naught, it would fall apart; but if it be of God, if it proceeds from Him, if it has its origin and source in Him, then you cannot, you will not be able to overthrow it, or make it come to naught. You will not make it fall apart as the human work.

Oh yes, the gospel will meet hindrances, obstacles, defiance, opposition of unbelief, dangers of errors, seeking to supplant the true faith, and fierce persecutions of ungodly power, hoping to stop by force the progress of this hated truth. There will be divisions and dissensions of Christians among themselves. There is the abounding of iniquity and sometimes the chilling of the love of the Christians. There may be the sudden rise of some heresy and apostasy and there may also be many obstacles, dangers, and attacks. For the preachers, there may be the fierce threatenings, and stripes inflicted, the majesty of the law against them, and the authority of rulers arrayed against them, but that will all be in vain. The preachers cannot be silent. The preaching cannot be stopped. Miracles cannot be hid. Men's hearts will turn to God and Christ when the Lord opens those hearts and empties them of self, plants His work, and causes it to grow. They will turn to Him.

We see this soon after Pentecost. There were daily added to the church.

We read about five thousand and about a multitude of men and women. We read in Acts 6 that even the priests were added to this church.

What a comforting truth this is also for our days! The work of God in the church is His work and cannot be destroyed, also not the spiritual life in a true child of God. The rain may descend and the floods may come. The winds may blow. There will be trials and adversities. There will be evil lusts, the soul's temptations and persecutions; but they will be kept by Him.

Now the question for us: which is it? What do we speak about and what do we follow? Is it the work of man or the work of God? The work of man misses humility, it misses the stamp of the work of God. The work of God may be small, it may be attacked and it may be in darkness for a while, but it will be crowned with God's blessing. Gamaliel was right, the work of God cannot be overthrown. May that be our hope in difficult times. Oh, may we have discerning ears and eyes! May we also ask the Lord for His Spirit to examine our own heart whether we began with God or the Lord began with us, whether it is human work or the work of God. The work of God will be crowned and will end in Him. In the work of God, He will be honored and glorified. *"The work Thou hast for me begun shall by Thy grace be fully done."* Blessed are they whose hope is in His work and who often ask the Lord that His work may appear unto His servants and that it may be revealed to the joy of God's church and to the glory of God's Holy Name.

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