

By Jamie Buckingham

FACING THE SANHEDRIN

Despite all God has done to break them up, sanhedrins, those religious courts charged with defending the faith, continue among us. In New Testament times the Sanhedrin, a council of 70 scholars with the high priest as chairman, was the supreme Jewish court of justice. Its task: to preserve the purity of the law.

The latest sanhedrin report comes from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where the missions committee of the Salem Baptist Church voted to withdraw financial support from one of their missionaries because he believes the gift of tongues is for today. The young missionary, whose name I cannot use because he is working in a highly sensitive African nation, was dismissed because the church's constitution "forbids giving financial support to missionaries not in accord with the church's doctrinal position."

In this case the church does not have an official doctrine. What it has is a tract by the late Charles Stevens ("printed and distributed by the hundreds") stating "the sign gifts have ceased and are not in the church today."

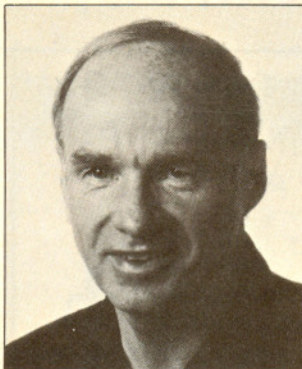
It also has a statement passed on by the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism stating: "We believe the Bible disavows the authenticity of the sign gifts of prophecy, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, miracles and healing for today and repudiates the experience-oriented theology and ecumenically-oriented practice of the Charismatic movement."

The church also is influenced by the statement of the Piedmont Bible College which says, "Speaking in tongues is not for this age. The current Charismatic involvement has its emphasis on experience and is in grave error."

These statements qualify as a modern Talmud, which when applied to a local congregation, are the equivalent to the "halakah" (legal enactments) of present day Jewry.

Last fall two deacons of the church accused the missionary of believing that the gifts of the Spirit are for this age. The missionary was home on furlough and the week he was to leave to return to the mission field he was brought before the committee for interrogation—much as Stephen appeared before the Sanhedrin. He responded with a loving but firm statement: "I do not believe that the gift of tongues has ceased. I do not find any clear teaching in the Scripture that it was a gift just for the 'apostolic age'.... First Corinthians 14:5 teaches that the purpose of tongues is for the edification of the Church. Therefore as long as the church exists, so will the gift of tongues...."

When grilled, the young missionary gave a simple scriptural defense of 1 Corinthians 12-14, saying, "I don't think we should pursue or elevate the gift and give it an undue importance. I know some who teach that everyone should speak in tongues. They teach that unless you speak in tongues you are not Spirit-filled. I don't believe this. Paul clearly indicates all do not have this gift in 1 Corinthians 12:30."



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The church officials were not vindictive—just bound by their traditions. The issue was even more confused because the missionary does not, personally, speak in tongues. However, his statement before the committee was so eloquent it deserves reprinting.

"If I didn't believe in the deity of Christ, or the inspiration of the Scriptures, or some other essential doctrine of the Christian faith, this would be something else. In the light of eternity, how important is the issue of tongues? Is our unity found in tongues or in Christ? Isn't it possible to be one in the Spirit and disagree on tongues?"

"Since we are imperfect, fallible human beings, none of us has all the truth. Good, godly men down through the ages have disagreed on non-essential issues and will continue to do so until the end of time. On the mission field I work with others who do not agree with me in this issue, but we don't let this divide us. Why does it have to at Salem?"

"The most important issue in all this discussion is not our differences over tongues, but how we love, accept, and support each other in spite of our differences. In a world that is torn apart by war, racism, mistrust, and disunity, shouldn't we, the body of Christ, be an example of love and unity? What kind of example are we before men when we break unity for such minor issues?...."

He closed his powerful statement with a disturbing question.

"God has convicted me that I have only been exercising one-third of the ministry that Jesus and His disciples did.... The disciples had a three-pronged ministry: (1) sharing the gospel; (2) healing the people; and (3) casting out demons. There is a need for this in the country where I serve. I will start practicing this. God has been leading me in this.... I don't think I have any special gift in any three of these areas, but I do feel I should follow the example of Jesus and do what He did. Can we ever go wrong by following the example of Jesus?"

Sanhedrins, of course, always stone those who follow Jesus.

Ironically, the committee loved the missionary and respected his work. In a strange twist, while ruling that his "missionary commission by the church be rescinded and that his official church financial support be discontinued," they then became "talmudic" (trying to circumvent the law) by encouraging the church to give designated offerings to help with his support.

The missionary had asked: "Can we ever go wrong by following the example of Jesus?"

But Jesus said: "These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of their synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service" (John 16:1,2).

The answer: You'll never go wrong—but if you follow it closely enough, you, too, will wind up on a cross. Nailed there by your religious companions. ■