

Mr. Maybe

By David Feddes

Mr. Maybe is openminded. Bring up almost any matter with him and ask whether he thinks a certain position is right, and he will answer, “Maybe... maybe not.”

Mr. Maybe is fair. He sees both sides of an argument. He never says one side is right and the other wrong. He gives both sides equal weight.

Mr. Maybe is tolerant. He doesn't get too excited about his own beliefs, and he doesn't attack other beliefs. If there's a disagreement or dispute, his advice is, “Live and let live.”

Mr. Maybe is careful. He refuses to be worried or hurried into committing himself. His approach is, “Look before you leap. Haste makes waste. Don't do anything stupid. Wait and see.”

Mr. Maybe is realistic. He's been around long enough not to get caught up in the things other people get excited about. Mr. Maybe doesn't jump on the bandwagon, and he doesn't try to stop it. He just stands off to the side and lets it run its course. He's watched enough bandwagons to know that almost every one of them ends in a crash. Even if it seems appealing when you first see it, why jump on if it might end up crashing? On the other hand, if it's something you think is bad, why get all hot and bothered about trying to stop it? If it's likely to crash on its own anyway, why waste energy trying to stop it?

When it's put that way, it may sound like Mr. Maybe has his mind made up that the thing in question is bound to fail. But of course he's too openminded to do that. He has to allow for the possibility that one of these bandwagons just might turn out to be a good thing and not just a passing fad. So he always goes back to his favorite answer: maybe... or maybe not. He doesn't know for sure, and he doesn't need to know. If it's bad, it will wreck itself. And if it turns out to be good—well, then, Mr. Maybe can say he never got in the way of a good thing.

Now, couldn't the world use a lot more people like that: openminded, fair, tolerant, careful, realistic. Shouldn't we all be like that? We've had so many bloody conflicts where both sides were sure they were right and their enemies were wrong; so many vicious political fights that were narrowminded and meanspirited; so many ugly religious quarrels where everybody claimed to have a corner on the truth—we've had so much bombing and blaming and bickering, it's no wonder Mr. Maybe has become something of a hero. If every person on earth would become a Mr. Maybe or a Ms. Maybe, wouldn't it be a great thing?

Maybe... maybe not!

If you were about to shout a resounding “Yes!”, if you were about to say that we should all be like Mr. Maybe—no *maybe* about it—then you've just discovered how hard it is to be Mr. Maybe consistently. There's always a *maybe* when you're Mr. Maybe—even when it comes to the question of whether to be Mr. Maybe at all!

But enough of that. Enough about Mr. Maybe in the abstract. Let's look at a real-life Mr. Maybe in action. Let's watch him at his best, quieting an angry mob and stopping a lynching. Then let's ask whether Mr. Maybe should be our hero.

A Lynch Mob

In this case, Mr. Maybe's real name is Gamaliel. In his time Gamaliel was the most famous teacher in Israel. He was moderate. He avoided extremes. Everything about Gamaliel was calm, cool, and sensible, even when he was surrounded by hotheads. In Acts 5 the Bible tells how Gamaliel played a role in stopping a lynching.

Here's what happened. Some men calling themselves apostles were claiming to do miracles and saying that Jesus of Nazareth, a man recently crucified and buried, was now alive and exalted to the throne of God. Many people were getting caught up in this movement, and the mainline religious leaders didn't like it. They ordered the apostles to stop, and they threatened to punish them if they didn't. But it was a waste of breath. The apostles went right on preaching and doing miracles in Jesus' name.

So the religious establishment took action. They arrested the apostles and put them in jail. But during the night the men escaped somehow. They said an angel set them free. At daybreak they were right back in the temple, teaching and urging people to follow this Jesus. So the religious leaders did what religious leaders often do: they called a meeting. A group of soldiers from temple security got the apostles and escorted them to the meeting of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin. The high priest said, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in the name of Jesus. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

Peter and the other apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

That was not what the religious establishment wanted to hear. Who did these uneducated riffraff think they were, to talk back to men of such prestige and education? Where did these so-called apostles get the right to claim that God was on their side? How could they say that a blaspheming rabble rouser from Nazareth, convicted and condemned by this very panel of experts, was God's Prince and the Savior of Israel? What gave these obnoxious apostles the right to say that their claims were also the claims of God's very own Spirit? Of all the nerve! The Bible says that when the religious leaders heard these things, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. They had a mind to lynch the apostles right then and there.

Voice of Tolerance

But before they could do anything rash, Mr. Maybe stood up. Gamaliel, says the Bible, was "a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people." When Gamaliel stood to talk, people listened, and this was no exception. He asked that the apostles be excused so that he could speak to a closed session of his fellow members of the Sanhedrin. Then he addressed them:

"Men of Israel," he said, "consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go.

So give Mr. Maybe credit. The speech worked. Gamaliel convinced his colleagues not to kill the apostles on the spot. They got a terrible whipping for disobeying the Sanhedrin's previous orders, but at least they weren't killed for blasphemy.

When you hear this story, you may think of Gamaliel as a hero of sorts. If so, you're not alone. Quite a few Bible scholars speak of him the same way. Gamaliel is one of the good guys. He's a voice of tolerance in a murderous mob.

But is Mr. Maybe really the hero of the story?

Okay, so he seems to believe in religious freedom of a sort. But did you notice that before he recommended staying neutral, Gamaliel first told how self-proclaimed messiahs and their followers were always getting snuffed out by the armies of Rome? So was Gamaliel really neutral? Or was he just saying that there was no need to get blood on their own hands when they could count on the Roman military to do the dirty work for them? Was he being sensitive, or just cynical? "Leave these men alone! Let them go!" he said. Sounds tolerant enough—but wasn't he really saying, "Give them enough rope, and they'll hang themselves with it—or the Romans will hang them for us."

Of course, being Mr. Maybe and a religious man besides, Gamaliel couldn't leave it at that. He had to allow for another possibility, at least in theory. From a human point of view, these fishermen and other uneducated nobodies who followed Jesus were bound to fail. There was no way they could possibly succeed—unless maybe, just maybe, God really was on their side, as they said. Not likely, of course, but one had to allow for it in theory. As long as there was even the tiniest chance that God was with them, it wouldn't be smart to fight against them.

It all made sense, at least in theory. And that's exactly where Mr. Maybe left this Jesus stuff: in the realm of theory. He gave his speech, and that was it. What more could he do? When the apostles were whipped savagely, Gamaliel sat by in silence. He wasn't about to risk harm by standing between them and the whip.

And afterward? Well, Mr. Maybe mentioned in his speech the theoretical possibility that God might be with the apostles, but did he spend any time with them afterward to find out whether they really were in touch with God? Did he try to learn more about Jesus from them? Not that we know of.

Apparently, Mr. Maybe wasn't even interested in finding out whether Jesus had been raised from the dead. As a Pharisee, Gamaliel believed (in theory, at least) that God would eventually raise dead people back to life. But when the apostles spoke of resurrection not as a distant theory but as an accomplished fact, Gamaliel wasn't interested. He didn't bother to check their story out. He didn't weigh the evidence. He didn't go to the various eyewitnesses who had seen Jesus alive. He stayed distant and neutral. He had no desire to learn more about the risen Christ.

We live in a time when it's considered a great virtue not to take sides. The key to getting along with everyone is for none of us ever to make a big deal of anything. Mr. Maybe is our hero. He certainly seems wiser than the fanatics who attack and even kill others for what they believe.

But are those the only choices, either to have no strong beliefs or else to hurt those who have different beliefs? No, there's another way: the way of the apostles, the way of Christ himself—not fanatical cruelty or timid tolerance, but strong faith and the courage to suffer for that faith. The apostles weren't fanatics, willing to kill for their faith; but they were heroes, willing to die for their faith.

When we compare Gamaliel to some of the hotheads around him, he looks pretty good. But when we compare him to the apostles of Jesus, he doesn't look so good. Gamaliel gave speeches and stayed neutral and played it safe. The apostles, at the risk of their lives, loved their enemies enough to share the gospel with them and tell them that Jesus is the only way to be

saved (Acts 4:12). They risked their lives to share Christ, and they suffered a terrible beating. But they still rejoiced, says the Bible, “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name [of Jesus]... they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

So who’s the hero here? Not Mr. Maybe. Not the man who said “Wait and see” and then proceeded to ignore Jesus and his followers. No, the real heroes were those who were so sure of Jesus’ resurrection that they shared Christ with others and were willing to suffer for him. They loved the risen Christ so much, and they loved other people so much, that they kept on risking everything in order to follow Christ and to share his good news with others. Mr. Maybe’s caution can’t hold a candle to the disciples’ courage.

Mr. Angry

Mr. Maybe’s neutral response to the message of the risen Jesus may have left him farther from God’s kingdom than the fanatics who wanted to kill the Christians. That may sound crazy, but consider what happened to a former student of Gamaliel. This man was so furious at the Christians and so opposed to their message that he ignored his teacher’s advice. If Gamaliel was Mr. Maybe, this man was Mr. Angry. Instead of leaving the Christians alone as Gamaliel suggested, he went on to supervise the killing of the first Christian martyr, and then he did all he could to hunt down others on his hit list.

But it was to this man, Saul of Tarsus—and not to Gamaliel—that the risen Jesus showed himself. Saul the killer got a new heart and a new name, and he became Paul the apostle. Meanwhile, Paul’s teacher, Mr. Maybe, never did come to faith in Christ.

Is it possible that Jesus would rather deal with someone who fights him than with someone who tries to be neutral toward him? Is it possible that Jesus would rather save Mr. Angry than Mr. Maybe? Apparently so. Mr. Angry reacts to Jesus in a violent and negative way, but at least he reacts. Mr. Maybe just says Jesus might be right and then ignores him for all practical purposes. He won’t let anything shake him up or force a reaction, not even the news that God sent his own Son to die for us and then raised him to life again.

I suspect that I’m talking to more than one Mr. Maybe or Ms. Maybe right now. You know a bit about Jesus, you’ve heard about his resurrection, and you may even be inclined to believe it. But you want to keep an open mind. You’re willing to let Christians do their thing, as long as it doesn’t interfere with you. Who knows? God might really be with them. Still, you’re not about to do anything radical, like joining up with them. Maybe Jesus is for real, but then again, maybe not. In any case, you’re not all that eager to find out. You’re going to stay neutral.

The brilliant French thinker Blaise Pascal once said that there are only two kinds of people who are reasonable: those who love Christ with all their heart because they have found him, and those who seek Christ with all their heart because they have not found him. If you don’t yet love totally, at least seek totally. Gamaliel did neither. He didn’t love or seek. He tolerated; he said a calm, aloof “maybe.” Are you doing the same? Have you decided not to be against Christ or for him, but just to keep him at arm’s length?

How in the world can you say a cool, calm “maybe” to the news that Jesus died to take away our sins? How can you pretend to be neutral about the resurrection of Jesus Christ? How can you not react to news like that? You can believe the news of the resurrection with joy; you can fight it as a horrible hoax; or, if you really are undecided, you can at least pursue the matter and keep seeking until you find out the truth.

No Neutral Zone

But one thing you can't do is say "maybe" and then go your own way. That's the worst possible response to the resurrected Jesus. You can't sit on the fence. There is no fence. You can't be neutral toward Jesus. There is no neutral zone. Jesus said, "He who is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30). In fact, a neutral "maybe" is more offensive to Jesus than an angry "no."

One thing Jesus can't stomach is lukewarmness. He can't stomach non-Christians who react to him with mild tolerance, and he can't stomach those who consider themselves Christians but have no real love or deep commitment to him. Jesus once told the people of a certain church, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:15-16).

Our society seems to prize tolerance. But what sort of tolerance is it? In healthy tolerance, our hearts are so warm toward others that we refuse to harm them no matter how wrong they might be. In sickly tolerance, our hearts are so lukewarm toward God and other people that we just don't care whether they honor God and receive his salvation. Author Dorothy Sayers put it this way: "In the world it is called tolerance, but in hell it is called despair. The sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, enjoys nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing but remains alive because there is nothing which it would die for."

We've seen how Gamaliel tolerated messengers of the risen Christ but showed no further interest in their message. Now let's shift the focus for a moment to a group of people who came even closer than Gamaliel to Jesus' resurrection: the soldiers who were guarding Jesus' tomb on the morning he rose from the dead.

The soldiers were right there when the ground shook and the angel opened the tomb in a flash like lightning. They were so overwhelmed by it all that they fainted dead away. If ever an experience would change your life, that would be it! But when the soldiers recovered and found the tomb empty, what was their biggest concern? "How are we going to explain this to our superiors?" They had just been standing within a few feet of the greatest event in the universe, yet all they could think about was how to keep the boss off their back.

They went to the religious leaders and explained the problem. Those leaders promised to keep the soldiers out of trouble with the governor, gave them a carefully crafted lie to tell anybody who asked questions, and even paid them a large sum of money. How did the soldier react? They were delighted. They figured, "Who cares what happened back there at the tomb? It was weird and supernatural, but we're not going to ask any questions or try to find out more about this Jesus. We're off the hook with our superiors, that's what matters. And we've even got extra money to show for it. What more could we want?"

Amazing, isn't it? You can be so focused on your own little agenda, like keeping your job or making a little extra money, that you could be standing right there when Jesus' tomb was opened and still not care what really happened.

My friend, how have you responded to the risen Jesus? Are you like those first followers of Jesus? Have you trusted in the living Christ? Do you rejoice in the privilege of living for him and even suffering for him, if need be? Are you so excited about him that you can't wait to tell others about him?

Or are you just not interested? Maybe you'd rather ignore Jesus. Maybe you're more concerned with next week than with eternity. You're more worried about your boss and your

business and your bank account than about God. Are you going to ignore Jesus' resurrection and just grab for money and live a lie, like those stupid soldiers?

Or are you more smooth and sophisticated—like Mr. Maybe? You're tolerant. You're openminded. You're so good at being neutral that you won't react even to the news that God's own Son died and rose again. If that's your attitude, you have even less excuse than Gamaliel had.

If you insist on making Mr. Maybe your hero, then may I remind you of something? Gamaliel was right about at least one thing. He said of Jesus' followers, "If their purpose is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men." If God hadn't been with that little band of Christians, the Jesus movement would have vanished. Those uneducated people had no chance against the arguments of religious experts. Those poor, powerless peasants had no defense against the bloody persecution of the Roman Empire. If all they had was their own wisdom and strength, they were bound to fail, and the Jesus movement was destined to disappear.

But if God was with them, nobody would be able to stop those Christians. If Mr. Maybe could visit us today, I think that even Gamaliel would have to admit that the church of Jesus has met the test of time. That powerless little band has become a vast, worldwide church.

Mr. Maybe's advice was, "Wait and see." It's been almost 2,000 years now. How much longer do you have to wait? How much more do you need to see? You have the advantage of 20/20 hindsight, something Mr. Maybe didn't have. You can see that a movement which couldn't possibly survive without God's help has indeed survived and grown. More people in the world claim allegiance to Jesus Christ than to any other leader or ideology. Christianity is one bandwagon that hasn't crashed. The church of Christ rolls on through the ages, gathering momentum as it goes.

So again, what's your response to Jesus? Don't try to be neutral. There's no such thing as neutral.

Don't "tolerate" Jesus. Trust him!

Don't say *maybe*. Say *yes*!