

10. Benevolence and Discipline in the Early Church: Acts 4:32-5:11

In Acts 4:32-5:11, benevolence and discipline in the early church interweave. Both illustrate that the early church understood that God's commands must be obeyed. From the beginning on the Day of Pentecost, Christians had tended to one another's needs. In Acts 2:44-45, immediately after the establishment of the church, the believers took care of the destitute: "44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." Acts 4:44 picks up this story of brotherly kindness manifested through the church.

Benevolence in the Church

Acts 4:32-35

32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. 34 There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

That all the believers were one in heart and mind is the prerequisite for giving. The power of their love and unity was such that they disowned their possessions and shared everything. There are many examples of this selflessness as the church spread and grew. Two will suffice: the church at Antioch gave liberally to the churches of Judea as Luke recorded in Acts 11:27-30:

27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) 29 The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. 30 This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

The other example is the churches of Achaia and Macedonia who also sent help to the poverty-stricken Christians of Judea according to 2 Cor 8:2-5:

2 Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. 5 And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.

Because of their giving, there were no needy Christians among them. This example shows that many who owned lands willingly sold them, laying the money at the apostles' feet. The money was distributed to everyone as they had need.

Acts 4:36-37

36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

One such person who sold land and brought the money to the apostles was Joseph, called Barnabas. Barnabas is an example of a Christian who fulfilled his commitment to care for the needy. Our next example is one of two people who did not fulfill their commitment but, instead, sought to keep the money for themselves. Indeed, Barnabas lived up to his name

which means Son of Encouragement. Barnabas will reappear 30 times in the book of Acts, where he becomes one of Paul's main companions on his missionary journeys.

Ananias Lies to God

Acts 5:1-2

5 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, were as different from Barnabas as night is different from day. The key to understanding their greed is in the fact that they kept back part of the money for themselves. Their sin was two-fold: they were greedy, and they were deceitful. They failed to understand the teaching of the Lord when he said in Luke 12:15, "15 Then he said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.'" Greed and lust for money rise above all other sins and become themselves idolatry, according to Paul in Col 3:5, "5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry." Ananias and Sapphira also failed to understand the extreme jeopardy in which they had placed themselves. Christ had taught in Matt 6:24, "24 No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

Acts 5:3-4

3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."

They compounded their sin of greed and love for money by their effort to cover up their sin, which led them to lie. One sin leads to another, according to the adage. In fact, lying is such a dangerous sin that it appears to separate the righteous from the unrighteous and the Revelation. Rev 14:4-5 speaks of the righteous by saying, "They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. 5 No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless." In contrast, all liars are condemned in Rev 21:8, "8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

Acts 5:5-6

5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. 6 Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

The immediate punishment of Ananias, and later Sapphira, was to require their lives. Punishment came immediately and by the hand of God, but this is the only occurrence of such discipline. This intervention by the hand of God through the Holy Spirit is a one-time happening, parallel to the intervention of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Immediately, they came upon all who heard, confirming the word of God spoken by the apostles on the matter of giving. There are many other occasions of discipline in the New Testament, but they are all administered by the church. Rom 16:17-18 calls for discipline of divisive people:

17 I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. 18 For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites.

In 1 Cor 5:11, Paul instructs the church at Corinth to avoid immoral members:

11 But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.

Paul also instructs the church on how to deal with erring brothers in 1 Cor 5:4-5:

4 When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, 5 hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

2 Thess 3:14-15 also describes how the church is to deal with members who are erring:

14 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. 15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

The church today should take special care to implement the directions given by the apostles on discipline. The church will be stronger, and Christians who are restored will be saved.

Sapphira Also Lies to God

Acts 5:7-8

7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

9 Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

The fate of Sapphira is exactly the same as that of Ananias; she pays with her life for testing the Holy Spirit. Of all the lessons learned from this episode, perhaps the greatest is that we are not to test the Holy Spirit. The consequences for us will be far greater than losing our lives; we will lose our eternal souls.

Great Fear Seized the Whole Church

Acts 5:10-11

10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

The conclusion of this example is in how the church responded. Luke reports that great fear seized the whole church and all who heard. As we read about this episode, we should develop proper respect for the instruction of the Lord. In our actions, we should commit to what the Lord has said that we must do. The respect that we have for the Lord will keep us from lying about our sins and testing the Holy Spirit. Of the two examples, Barnabas and Ananias and his wife Sapphira, Barnabas illustrates the attitude of benevolence necessary for all Christians. The other lesson from Ananias and Sapphira is that we are not to test the Holy Spirit.