

SAPPHIRA

Acts 4:32 – 5:13

Just before our reading Luke tells us that the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31). The immediate result was that they ‘spoke the word of God boldly’ and we see from verse 33 that this meant that they testified to the resurrection of Jesus. Luke has already told us that this was one of their primary Apostolic responsibilities: “beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” (Acts 1:22). So they ignored the ban imposed by the Sanhedrin on speaking in the name of Jesus and God’s grace was sustaining them.

But, Luke does not leave it there. He is concerned to show that the fullness of the Spirit is expressed in deeds as well as words, in service as well as witness, in love for the family of believers as well as in testimony to the world. So, just as after the first coming of the Spirit he describes the characteristics of the Spirit-filled community (2:42–47), then after they are again filled with the Spirit Luke provides a second description that we read (4:32–37). In both cases his emphasis is the same. *All the believers*, he begins, in 4:32 as in 2:44, formed a closely knit group. They ‘were together’ (2:44), as they devoted themselves to ‘the fellowship’ (2:42), and they *were one in heart and mind* (4:32). This was the fundamental solidarity of love which the believers enjoyed, and their economic sharing was just one expression of the union of their hearts and minds.

Let’s compare Luke’s two pictures of the same united, Spirit-filled church in Jerusalem. Although the two accounts are verbally independent of one another, he mentions in each the same three consequences of their mutual commitment. The first is their radical attitude, in particular to their possessions. They ‘had everything in common’ (2:44); *no-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had* (4:32b). Both verses contain the two key words *hapanta koina*, ‘all things in common’. In the light of Peter’s later statement to Ananias that his property was his own (5:4), this can’t mean that the believers had literally renounced private ownership, in favour of common, ownership. Probably the important phrase is that *no-one claimed* his possessions as his own. Although in fact and in law they continued to own their goods, yet in heart and mind they cultivated an attitude so radical that they thought of their possessions as being available to help their needy sisters and brothers.

Secondly, their radical attitude led to sacrificial action, namely that *from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them*, and then put the sale money *at the apostles’ feet*, so that they might distribute it (34b–35). The same actions of selling and distributing are referred to in 2:45. In both cases the selling was voluntary and sporadic (*from time to time*), as the need for ready cash arose.

Thirdly, both the radical attitude and the practical action were based on the equitable principle that distribution was proportionate to genuine need. The two accounts use the identical words *kathoti an tis chreian eixen*, meaning ‘according as anyone had need’ (35b, cf. 2:45). Only in the second description, however, does Luke state the consequence of the principled distribution of relief, namely *there were no needy persons among them* (34a).

In his commentary on this passage Calvin wrote:

We must have hearts that are harder than iron if we are not moved by the reading of this narrative. In those days the believers gave abundantly of what was their own; we in our day are content not just jealously to retain what we possess, but callously to rob others.... They sold their own possessions in those days; in our day it is the lust to purchase that reigns supreme. At that time love made each man's own possessions common property for those in need; in our day such is the inhumanity of many, that they begrudge to the poor a common dwelling upon earth, the common use of water, air and sky.

When we're analyzing this so-called 'Jerusalem experiment', we need to avoid taking up extreme positions. On the one hand we can't simply dismiss it as a rash and foolish mistake, motivated by the false expectation of an imminent Parousia and causing the poverty which Paul had later to remedy by his collection from the Greek churches. Luke gives no hint of anything like that. On the other hand we can't say that the Jerusalem church, being filled with the Spirit, laid down an obligatory model—a kind of primitive Christian 'communism'—which God wants all Spirit-filled communities to copy. The fact that the selling and giving were voluntary is enough to dispose of this second idea.

I think what this passage is calling us to do is to note and seek to imitate the care of the needy and the sacrificial generosity which the Holy Spirit created. Of course, many societies have dreamed of the ending of poverty. The Greeks, for example, looked back to a golden age in which all property was public, and Pythagoras is said to have practised it with his disciples, and to have coined the epigram 'among friends everything is common' (*koina*). Plato later incorporated this ideal in his vision of a utopian republic. Then Josephus wrote that the Essenes, whom we know as the Qumran community, 'live the same kind of life as do those whom the Greeks call Pythagoreans'. But, we absolutely must understand that the inspiration for the common life and love of the Jerusalem church came neither from Pythagoras, nor from Plato, nor from the Essenes, but from the Old Testament, as illumined by Jesus. Jewish Law was quite clear on the matter: 'there should be no poor among you' (Deuteronomy. 15:4). Also, Luke stressed Jesus's teaching that the gospel of the kingdom was good news for the poor. But how could it be good news for the poor unless it offered them justice as well as salvation, the abolition of their poverty as well as the remission of their sins?

Having portrayed the solidarity of love enjoyed by the Jerusalem church, Luke supplies his readers with two contrasting examples: Barnabas whose generosity and openness fulfilled the ideal – see verses 36-37 (4:36–37) and Ananias and Sapphira whose greed and hypocrisy contradicted it (5:1ff.). 'Barnabas' (*Son of Encouragement*) was actually the nickname which the apostles gave, on account of his helpfulness, to *Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus* (36). He *sold a field he owned*, presumably in Cyprus, and laid the money *at the apostles' feet* (37). The Pentateuchal regulations prohibiting priests and Levites from holding landed property seem to have become a dead letter by this time. The piece of land which he possessed may not have been large; whatever it was, he sold it and gave the purchase-price to the apostles for the benefit of the community. It was an act of generosity fully in keeping with his character as it later emerges in the book of Acts.

Now we come to the story of Ananias and Sapphira which show that life in this early Christian community was by no means perfect. It is also a further example of the strategy of Satan. Several commentators have suggested a parallel between Ananias and Achan—the Achan who stole money and clothing after the destruction of Jericho (Joshua 7). Bengel wrote: 'the sin of Achan and that of Ananias were in many respects similar, at the beginning of the

churches of the Old and New Testament respectively'. F. F. Bruce sees a further analogy: 'The story of Ananias is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In both narratives an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God.'

What we are told is that *a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, firstly sold a piece of property and secondly, with his wife's full knowledge (or 'connivance', JB), he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.*

To all appearances, Barnabas and Ananias did the same thing. Both sold a property. Both brought the proceeds of the sale to the apostles, and both committed it to their disposal. The difference was that Barnabas brought all the sale money, while Ananias brought only a part of it. Thus Ananias and Sapphira perpetuated a double sin, a combination of dishonesty and deceit. At first sight, there was nothing wrong in their withholding part of the sale money. As Peter plainly said later, their property was their own both before and after the sale (see 5:4).

So they were under no obligation to sell their piece of land or, having sold it, to give away any – let alone all – of the proceeds. That isn't the whole story, however. There is something else, something half-hidden. For Luke, in declaring that Ananias *kept back* part of the money for himself, chooses the verb *nosphizomai*, which means to 'misappropriate'. The same word was used in LXX of Achan's theft, and in its only other New Testament occurrence (Titus 2:10) it means to steal. We have to assume, therefore, that before the sale Ananias and Sapphira had entered into some kind of agreement to give the church the total amount raised. Because of this, when they brought only some instead of all, they were guilty of embezzlement.

It was not on this sin that Peter concentrated, however, but on the other, hypocrisy. The apostle's complaint was not so much that they lacked honesty (bringing only a part of the sale price) but that they lacked integrity (bringing only a part, while pretending to bring the whole). They were not so much misers as thieves and – above all – liars. They wanted the credit and the prestige for sacrificial generosity, without the inconvenience and loss it entailed. So, in order to gain a reputation to which they had no right, they told a brazen lie. Their motive in giving was not to relieve the poor, but to fatten their own ego.

Peter saw behind Ananias' hypocrisy the subtle activity of Satan. He confronted Ananias: '*Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself [nosphizomai, again] some of the money you received for the land?*' (3). Peter accused him both of misappropriation and of falsehood, both of stealing and then of lying about it. But there was no need for either sin. '*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*' (4). We can note here that Peter assumes the deity of the Holy Spirit, since he says that to lie to the Spirit (3) was to lie to God (4).

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

⁷*About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter 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.'*

¹⁰At 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. ¹¹Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

No reply from Ananias to Peter's indictment and questions is recorded. Luke tells us only that God's judgment fell upon him: 'he dropped dead' (5a, NEB). Understandably *great fear*, the solemnity which is experienced in the presence of the holy God, *seized all who heard what had happened* (5b), even while certain *young men* attended to the burial (6). Burial rapidly followed death in such a hot climate in the absence of refrigeration – and indeed rapid burial remains the Jewish custom to this very day.

About three hours later the incident repeated itself. The death of Ananias may have come as a shock to Peter, but the following three hours gave him time to consider the tragedy and to recognize in it the divine judgment for an attempt to deceive the church, and to deceive the Spirit in the church. Ignorant of her husband's death, Sapphira *came in*. Peter gave her the chance to repent by asking her to state the price they had received for the land, but she merely identified herself with the duplicity of her husband (7–8). Peter told her that they had conspired *to test the Spirit of the Lord*, presuming to see whether they could get away with their deception, and warned her that those who had buried her husband would bury her too (9), whereupon *she fell down at his feet and died*, and the young men buried her beside her husband (10). For the second time Luke refers to the great fear which seized the whole church, and indeed all who heard about these events (11).

Many readers of this story are offended by what they regard as the severity of God's judgment. Some even say they 'hope that Ananias and Sapphira are legendary'. Or they try to exonerate God by attributing the death of Ananias and Sapphira instead to Peter who, they say, either laid a curse on them or put them under undue psychological pressure, thus anticipating the use of a modern lie detector. But, even if the anguish of a violated conscience contributed to their death on the human level, Luke clearly intends us to understand that it was a work of divine judgment. Once we accept this, there are at least three valuable lessons for us to learn.

Firstly, the gravity of their sin. Peter stressed this by repeating that their lie was not directed primarily against him, but against the Holy Spirit, that is, against God. And God hates hypocrisy. Luke has recorded Jesus' denunciation of it (Luke 12:10). Yet the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was also against the church. Perhaps it's intentional that Luke here uses for the first time the word *ekklēsia* (11) So he affirms the continuity of the Christian community with God's redeemed and gathered people in the Old Testament. Luke seems to be underlining the great evil of sinning against God's people. Falsehood ruins fellowship. If the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira had not been publicly exposed and punished, the Christian ideal of an open fellowship would not have been preserved, and the modern cry 'there are so many hypocrites in the church' would have been heard from the beginning.

The second lesson to be learned concerns the importance, even the sacredness, of the human conscience. Luke will later record Paul's claim before Felix that he always strove to keep his 'conscience clear before God and man' (Acts 24:16). This seems to be what John meant by 'walking in the light'. It is to live a transparent life before God, without guile or subterfuge, whose consequence is that 'we have fellowship with one another'. The 'brethren' of the East African revival, who lay great stress on this teaching, amusingly illustrate it by expressing their desire to 'live in a house without ceiling or walls', that is, to permit nothing to come

between them and either God or other people. It was this openness which Ananias and Sapphira failed to maintain.

Thirdly, the incident teaches the necessity of church discipline. Although physical death may have continued in some situations as a penalty for those sins which ‘despise the church of God’, it came to be associated with excommunication. The church has tended to oscillate in this area between extreme severity (disciplining members for the most trivial offences) and extreme laxity (exercising no discipline at all, even for serious offences). It is a good general rule that secret sins should be dealt with secretly, private sins privately, and only public sins publicly. Churches are also wise if they follow the successive stages taught by Jesus. Usually the offender will be brought to repentance before the final stage of excommunication is reached. But offences which are serious in themselves, have become a public scandal, and have not been repented of, should be judged. Presbyterians ‘fence the table’, that is, to make access to the Lord’s Supper conditional. For, they say, although the Lord’s table is open to sinners (who else either needs or wishes to come to it?), it is open only to penitent sinners. I don’t agree with this doctrine, but I can see how they come to that position.

We have now seen that, if the devil’s first tactic was to destroy the church by force from without, his second was to destroy it by falsehood from within. He has not given up the attempt, whether by the hypocrisy of those who profess but do not practise, or by the stubbornness of those who sin but do not repent. The church needs to preserve its vigilance.