

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts

(SB_Acts5_God’s Response to Power Lust)

Introduction

In chapter 3, we observed Peter and John healing a forty year old man (4:22) who was lame from birth and who daily begged for donations at one of the gates of the Temple. Since this man was well-known, his healing attracted attention from the Jews in Jerusalem. Peter used the occasion to proclaim Jesus as the Promised Messiah in Whose power the miracle was performed. The subject of chapter 4 is the response of the religious leaders to this event as well as the subsequent bonding effect between believers that resulted from the persecution that the religious leadership began to impose upon them. The messages delivered in chapters 3 & 4 and the words of the people reveal a hope for the soon return of Jesus and the glories that would follow (i.e. the Messianic Kingdom). As the believers bonded together and supported each other, Barnabas sets an example by selling land that he owned and giving the money to the apostles (4:36-37). All the people were “filled” (4:31) with the Holy Spirit (a type 1 filling), thus they supported the message and each other. Just as the seed Truth of the gospel was beginning to gain a foothold, the greed, jealousy and approbation lust that arose from the sin nature of one married couple posed a threat to the unity among believers that was essential at this critical moment.

Hypocrisy Motivated by Jealousy That Threatens the Incipient Unity of Faith

From the outside, the “sacrificial” act of Ananias and Sapphira appeared to be the same as the sacrificial action of Barnabas. However, the reality was different. In one sense, had Ananias and Sapphira’s actions not been judged and allowed to go unnoticed, it would have been possible that they would have later been used of Satan to counter the Truth and work to be offered by the Apostles and Barnabas. Their actions revealed a serious flaw in spiritual character that now stands in sharp contrast to that of a believer possessing genuine humility such as Barnabas. There is no place for approbation lust in the soul of the genuinely humble believer. The lust for approbation quickly seeks further gratification through power lust. Imagine the attempts that Ananias and Sapphira would have made to continue to gain the approval of the majority of the other believers. Imagine the power grabs and one-upmanship that would have become the norm of their behavior as they continued in their quest for power and approval. Imagine the distraction from the true message and example that was being presented through the lives, actions and words of early leaders such as Peter.

Principle: Approbation lust progresses to power lust. Power lust progresses to control of others, loss of freedom and suppression of truth.

Ananias' Jewish name means "Yahweh is gracious," and Sapphira's Aramaic name means "beautiful." Their names were ironic given their hypocritical behavior. Ananias presented their gift to the apostles exactly as Barnabas had done (4:37).

The Greek word *nosphizo*, ("kept back") also appears at the beginning of the record of Achan's sin in the Septuagint (Josh. 7:1, translated "took"). Achan, as well as Ananias and Sapphira, fell because of the lust for power – albeit in each case it was manifested in different ways. In the case of Achan, the lust for power drove Achan to violate God's explicit prohibition against hoarding and accumulating the wealth of those who had been conquered (Deut 7:25-26). His sin caused Israel to suffer its first defeat under Joshua in the Promised Land at a town named Ai (thirty-six brave men lost their lives). In the case of Ananias and Sapphira, the lust for power drove them to seek approbation by lying to God and man.

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Do you know any Christians who “pose” as spiritual, yet really aren’t? (Ananias and Sapphira were posers). I would probably be correct to say that virtually every Christian has at one time “posed” to others to be a spiritual believer when an honest, internal evaluation would reveal otherwise. When we “pose” in the Christian life, we are effectively lying to God, ourselves and others.

Principle: The “poser” image is effectively an attempt at salvation (deliverance in life) through one’s own efforts.

Principle: God will never work through the “poser” to bless the lives of others.

Principle: The only thing that God will do in the life of the “poser” is to eventually destroy the self-constructed stronghold in the soul – a stronghold that is held together by the adhesive of the world and the flesh. (God does this in order to bring about the necessary humility that God can use).

Note and Observation: Believers who have everything in the world in terms of material possessions, health, wealth, career, etc. are not generally believers who have truly grasped the magnitude of God’s mercy, grace, and lovingkindness towards them. Believers who have failed and who have lost everything in the world are in a good position to grasp the magnitude of God’s mercy and love. (Read story of Brennan Manning from *The Ragamuffin Gospel*).

Ananias and Sapphira were posers who were more interested in how others perceived them than how God really saw them. Their actions were effectively lies to God – attempts to present an image of themselves when the reality was far different. They were like the leaven of the Pharisees (self-righteous). We might as well be honest with God. He knows everything anyway. There is no need for posing in the Christian life.

Luke did not record exactly how Ananias died even though he was a physician. His interest was solely in pointing out that he did die immediately because of his sin.¹ Ananias’ sin resulted in premature physical death. It was a sin unto death (cf. 1 John 5:16; 1 Cor. 11:30).

The fact that God has only rarely dealt with sinners this way is due to the fact that He is merciful. He dealt with Ananias and Sapphira, Achan, Nadab and Abihu, and others severely because in each of their cases, He was just beginning to deal with a group of believers of whom they were a part. God executed judgment quickly in this case due to what was at stake. The rapid judgment served to illustrate how important it is for God’s people to be holy (cf. 1 Cor. 10:6). Furthermore God always deals more severely with those who have greater privilege and responsibility (cf. Luke 12:48; 1 Pet. 4:17).

Immediate burial was common in Palestine at this time, as the burial of Jesus illustrates. Evidently some of the younger and stronger believers disposed of Ananias’ corpse by preparing it for burial. Many people were buried in caves or holes in the ground that had been previously prepared for this purpose, e.g. the burials of Lazarus and Jesus.

Peter graciously gave Sapphira an opportunity to tell the truth, but she did not. He did not warn her ahead of time by mentioning her husband’s death because he wanted her to tell him the truth. She added a spoken lie to hypocrisy. Putting God to the test means seeing how far one can go in disobeying God—in this case lying to Him—before He will judge (cf. Deut. 6:16; Matt. 4:7).

¹ The Greek word *ekpsycho* (“breathed his last”) occurs in the New Testament here and only where God strikes someone in judgment (v. 10; 12:23; cf. Judg. 4:21, LXX, where Sisera was the victim).

Some have criticized Peter for dealing with Sapphira and Ananias so harshly. Nevertheless the text clearly indicates that in these matters Peter was under the Holy Spirit's influence (4:31) even as Ananias and Sapphira were under Satan's influence (v. 3). Peter had been God's agent of blessing in providing healing to people (3:6), but he was also God's instrument to bring judgment on others, as Jesus Christ had done.

In verse 11, Luke reemphasized the sobering effect these events produced in all who heard about them (v. 5; cf. 2:43). People probably said, "There but for the grace of God go I!"

This is the first use of the word "church" in Acts. The Greek word, *ekklesia*, means "called out assembly." This was a common word that writers often used to describe assemblies of people that met for political and various other types of meetings. The word "church," like the word "baptism," can refer to more than one thing. Sometimes it refers to the body of believing saints as it has existed throughout history. Sometimes it refers to a group of believers who live in one area at a particular time, a local church. Here in the early portion of the book of Acts, it refers to the local "church" in Jerusalem.

It is important to realize that there is a great possibility for confusion between the word "church" and the unique "body of Christ" to which Paul refers. To be honest with Scripture requires that we acknowledge the *trans-dispensational* nature of the word *ekklesia* (church) as well as the *distinction* between the unique "body of Christ" and the nation of Israel. Every reference to "Israel" in Scripture refers to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Every use of the word *ekklesia* in Scripture (LXX and the New Testament) is in reference to an assembly of believers and the context should determine the dispensational ramifications.

Some interpreters have questioned whether Ananias and Sapphira were genuine believers. Luke certainly implied that they were. They were included in the *ekklesia* as much as Barnabas was. Believers are capable of deliberate deceit.

"It is plain that the New Testament not only teaches the existence of the carnal Christian [1 Cor. 3:1-3; Gal. 5:16; Eph. 5:18] but of true Christians who persisted in their carnality up to the point of physical death [cf. 1 Cor. 3:15; 5:5; 11:30; Heb. 10:29; 1 John 5:16-17].²

Intensified External Opposition (5:12-42)

God's power manifest through the apostles in blessing (3:1-26) as well as in judgment (5:1-11) made an increasingly powerful impact on the residents of Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders increased their opposition to the apostles as they had increased their opposition to Jesus. Luke preserved the record of the developing attitudes that resulted. The Sadducees became more jealous and antagonistic, the Pharisees chose to react with moderation, and the Christians gained greater joy and confidence.

The Expanding Influence of the Apostles (5:12-16)

This passage is another of Luke's summaries of conditions in the early church that introduces what follows (cf. 2:42-47; 4:32-35). It also explains why the Sadducees became so jealous that they arrested not only Peter and John but other apostles as well. The apostles were

² Joseph Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Scholette Publishing, 1992), 64. Dillow uses the term "Christians" when in the specific context of our Acts passage, I would probably use the term "believer" so as to remove the connotation that the term "Christian" carries, i.e. a member of the Church Age Body of Christ. Nevertheless, Dillow's statement certainly is true in regard to believers of any dispensation.

gaining great influence not only in Jerusalem but also in the outlying areas. The healing of one lame man had triggered initial opposition (3:1-10), but now many people were being healed. This intensified the opposition.

Luke stopped giving numbers for the size of the church (cf. 1:15; 2:41; 4:4) and just said that God was adding multitudes of both men and women to the church constantly. People wanted to get close to Peter because he was healing so many (thus Luke's reference to Peter's shadow. The text does not say that Peter's shadow healed people. It says that people wanted to get close to Peter because he was so powerful. Even today some people in the Orient superstitiously believe that a person's shadow carries his power. Eastern parents have pulled their children away from the shadow of a wicked person and thrust them into the shadow of an honored individual.³ The action of these first century Near Easterners shows their respect for Peter who had the power to heal.

The Apostles are Imprisoned, then Freed (5:17-21)

This section is very similar to 4:32-35, though this summary shows the church gaining many more adherents and much greater influence than in the earlier passage. The apostles' appearance before the Sanhedrin 5:17-33

The popularity and effectiveness of the apostles riled the Sadducees just as Jesus' popularity and effectiveness had earlier. The high priest and most of the Sanhedrin members were Sadducees (4:1). They were full of jealousy and under the influence of Satan. Peter and John have been the apostles in view to this point, but now we read that Peter and the apostles (plural) stood before the Sanhedrin (v. 29). It is probable, therefore, that more apostles than just Peter and John are in view in this whole incident.

In verse 19, we see one of three miracles involving a jail door that Luke records in the book of Acts (cf. Peter in 12:6-11 and Paul and Silas in 16:26-27). The angel instructed the apostles to stand their ground and resist the opposition of the Sanhedrin.

The Apostles are Tried Again (5:22-32)

The hypocrisy of the religious "posers" is clear. They were more concerned about their own reputation and security than about the facts and the Truth. The Truth might have made it evident to everyone that their power was a sham. What makes their arrogance so blatant is the fact that they honestly believed that they held the power over the Apostles just like Jesus. They really believed that their actions were justified and that they were defending God.

The high priest introduced his comments with a reference to the authority of Israel's leaders. Pilate had similarly threatened Jesus with his authority (cf. John 19:10-11). The high priest showed his dislike for Jesus by not referring to the Lord by name. Official Jewish opposition to Jesus was firm. He believed the authority of the Sanhedrin was greater than the authority of Jesus (cf. Matt. 28:18). The leaders earlier had instructed Peter and John not to teach (3:18, 21), but Peter had said they would continue to do so because of Jesus' authority (3:19-20). Moreover Peter had charged Israel's leaders with Jesus' death (4:10-11). These rulers had rationalized away their guilt for Jesus' death probably blaming it on Jesus Himself and the Romans (cf. 3:15). The Jewish leaders felt the disciples were unfairly heaping guilt on them for having shed Jesus' blood. However only a few weeks earlier they had said to Pilate, "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matt. 27:25; cf. Matt. 23:35).⁴

³ See Dr. Thomas Constable's "Notes on the Book of Acts" at www.soniclight.com

⁴ Ibid.

Verse 29 clarifies that the authorities had arrested other apostles besides Peter and John. Peter as spokesman for the apostles did not attempt to defend their civil disobedience but simply repeated their responsibility to obey God rather than men, specifically the Sanhedrin (4:19; cf. Luke 12:4-5).

The Jews (the Sanhedrin) did not have the authority under Roman jurisdiction to inflict capital punishment; however, as with Jesus, they would have found some basis to justify such an action at the hand of the Romans. They would have carried forward with their plans had it not been for the intervention of the Pharisees as represented by Gamaliel.

Gamaliel's wise counsel (5:34-40)

As mentioned previously, the Pharisees were the minority party in the Sanhedrin. They were more influential with the masses than the Sadducees were. The Pharisees looked for a personal Messiah. They believed in the resurrection of the dead and the existence and activity of angels and demons. They tried to live a simple life in contrast to the Sadducees' luxurious living. The name "Pharisee" evidently comes from the Aramaic verb *peras*, meaning "to separate." They considered themselves to be separated to holiness and dedicated entirely to God. Most of the scribes, the Bible expositors of that day, were Pharisees. Consequently the Sadducees listened to the Pharisees and especially to Gamaliel.

Gamaliel was the leader of the more liberal school of Hillel, one of the two most influential parties within Pharisaism. He had been a protégé of Hillel, who was his grandfather, and Saul of Tarsus was one of his own promising young disciples (22:3). People called him Rabban Gamaliel. Rabban (lit. "our teacher") was a title of higher honor than rabbi (lit. "my teacher"). Gamaliel was the most respected Pharisee of his day. The Mishnah, a collection of commentaries on the oral laws of Israel published toward the end of the second century A.D., contains complementary statements about him.

After the apostles had left the meeting room, Gamaliel addressed his colleagues with the traditional designation "Men of Israel" (cf. 2:22). He warned his brethren to do nothing rash. He pointed to two similar movements that had failed when their leaders had died. Historians do not know anything about Theudas, though he may have come to prominence shortly after Herod the Great's death (ca. A.D. 4).

Judas of Galilee led a revolt against Rome in A.D. 6.⁵ The census in view was probably the one that Quirinius, legate of Syria, took in A.D. 6 when Archelaus was deposed and Judea became part of the Roman province of Syria. Judas founded the Zealot party in Israel that sought to throw off Roman rule violently.

His influence was considerable, though it declined after his death. Gamaliel seems to have been playing his influence down a little more than it deserved.

Gamaliel's point was that if God was not behind the apostles their efforts would prove futile in time. Obviously, Gamaliel believed the apostles' efforts were futile and that God was not behind them or he would have become a Christian. He offered the theoretical option that if the apostles were of God the Sanhedrin would find itself in the terrible position of fighting against God. Obviously Gamaliel believed in the sovereignty of God. He advised his brethren to wait and see. He did not believe that the apostles presented as serious a threat to the leaders of Judaism as the Sadducees believed they did. Saul of Tarsus took a different view of how the Jews should respond to the growing threat of Christianity. He executed many Christians, but that was after the number and influence of the Christians had increased dramatically (cf. chs. 6—7).

⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 2:8:1.

Gamaliel convinced his fellow Sanhedrin members. They decided to settle for flogging the apostles, probably with 39 lashes (Deut. 25:3; Acts 22:19; 2 Cor. 11:24), for disobeying their former order to stop preaching (4:18). This is the first instance of Christians receiving a physical beating for witnessing that Luke recorded in Acts. The rulers also threatened the apostles again and then released them (cf. 4:21). The official ban against preaching in Jesus' name remained in force.

The response of the apostles 5:41-42

Rather than emerging from their beating repentant, the apostles went home rejoicing. They did not enjoy the beating, but they considered it an honor to suffer disgrace for the sake of Jesus' name (cf. 3:6; 16:25). Jesus had predicted that people would hate and persecute His disciples and had told them to rejoice in it (Matt. 5:10-12; Luke 6:22-23). Peter later wrote that Christians should count it a privilege to suffer for Christ's sake (1 Pet. 4:13; cf. 2:18-21; 3:8-17; Phil. 1:29). As the Master had suffered abuse from His enemies so, too, His servants were suffering abuse for their witness.

This treatment did not discourage the apostles at all. Instead they continued teaching (explaining) and evangelizing daily, publicly in the temple and privately from house to house (cf. 2:46), that Jesus was the Messiah (cf. 28:31).