

Church without hypocrisy!

Acts 5:1-16

Church built on Testimony (all Christians are called to be witnesses not to church but to Jesus), Church built on His presence and power (the Body of Christ breathes and lives out of the Holy Spirit), Church where the Holy Spirit enables us to do with ease what we are called to do and be (no silver or gold just Jesus and the Gospel of Grace which is not only sufficient but uniquely so) & Church for builders not destroyers (no ounce of religiosity just a Jesus people). Now we see clearly that the Church that Jesus was building was one without hypocrisy and such a Church today will grab the attention of the people once again. The Early Church got serious with God and when people get serious with God Satan doesn't like it! The opposite is of course true and one has to say that at present the British Church is no threat to Satan who says a loud alleluia!! So as soon as the Holy Spirit came upon the Church, Satan launched a ferocious counter-attack. Pentecost was followed by persecution. An alternative title for Acts 4:32-6:7 might be 'the Strategy of Satan'. His strategy was carefully developed. He attacked on three fronts. His first and crudest tactic was physical violence; he tried to crush the Church by persecution. His second and more cunning assault was moral corruption or compromise. Having failed to destroy the Church from outside, he attempted through Ananias & Sapphira to insinuate evil into its interior life and so ruin the Christian Koinonia. His third and subtlest ploy was distraction. He sought to deflect the Apostles from their primary responsibilities of prayer and preaching by pre-occupying them with social administration, which was not their calling. If he had been successful in this, an untaught Church would have been exposed to every wind of false doctrine. These then were his weapons - Physical (persecution), Moral (subversion), & Professional (distraction).

Now I claim no very close or intimate familiarity with the Devil you will be pleased to hear but I am persuaded that he exists, and that he is utterly unscrupulous. Something else I have learned about him is that he is peculiarly lacking in imagination! Over the years he has changed neither his strategy, nor his tactics, nor his weapons; he is still in the same old rut. So a study of his campaign against the early Church should alert us to his probable strategy today. If we are then taken by surprise we shall therefore have no excuse! Luke is concerned, however, not only to expose the devils malice but also to show how he was overcome. First, the hypocrisy of Ananias & Sapphira was not allowed to spread, for Gods Judgement fell on them, and the Church grew by leaps and bounds (5:12-16). Secondly when the Sanhedrin again resorted to violence, they were restrained from killing the Apostles by the cautious counsel of Gamaliel (5:17-42). Thirdly, when the widows' dispute threatened to occupy all the time and energies of the Apostles, the social work was delegated to others, the Apostles resumed their priority tasks, and the Church again began to multiply (6:1-7). The Gamaliel principle is for another time and the raising up of the seven deacons for Pastor Les next week but let me simply for now deal with just one of these events - Ananias & Sapphira - a episode in the early Church many Christians would prefer was not there and which preachers dread, and teachers quake, about being asked questions. This story of the deceit and death of the married couple is important for several reasons. It illustrates the honesty of Luke as a historian; he did not suppress this sordid episode. It throws light on the interior life of the first Spirit-filled Community; it was not all romance and righteousness. And as said, this is a further example of Satan's Strategy. Many have discovered a parallel between Ananias & Achan - the Achan who stole money and clothes after the destruction

of Jericho (Joshua 7) one that I will develop more when speaking about tithing.

What we are told is that 'A Man called Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, first sold a piece of property and then, with his wife's full knowledge (or 'connivance' JBP), 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 proportion. Thus Ananias & Sapphira perpetuated a double sin, a combination of dishonesty and deceit. At first sight, there was nothing wrong in their withholding a part of the sale money. As Peter plainly said later, their property was their own before and after the sale (v4), 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 is not 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 Greek word was used in the LXX of Achans theft (Joshua 7:1) and in its only other NT occurrence it means to steal (Titus 2:10). We have to assume, therefore, that before the sale Ananias & Sapphira had entered into some kind of contract to give the Church the total money 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 that they lacked honesty (bringing only 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 of it. So, in order to gain a reputation to which they had no right, they told a blazon 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) some of the money you received from the land (v3)? Peter accused him both of misappropriation and 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 do doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.'(v4) We note in passing that Peter assumes the deity of the Holy Spirit, since to lie to Him (v3) was to lie to God (v4).

No reply from Ananias to Peter's indictment and questions are recorded. Luke tells us only that God's Judgment fell upon him: 'He dropped dead' (v5aNEB). Understandably Great fear, the solemnity which is experienced in the presence of the Holy God, seized all who heard what had happened (v5b). Even while certain young men attended to the burial (v6). About three hours later the incident repeated itself. Ignorant of her husband's death, Sapphira came in. Peter gave her a chance to repent by asking her to state the price received for the land, but she merely identified herself with his duplicity (v7-8). Peter protested 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 (v9), whereupon she fell down at his feet and died, and the young men buried her beside her husband (v10). For the second time Luke refers to the great fear, which seized the whole, Church and indeed all who heard about these events (v10):

unsurprisingly I think, and how those young men must have been impacted!

Many readers of this story are offended by what they regard as the severity of Gods judgment. Some even say they 'hope that A & S are legendary.' Or they try to exonerate God by attributing the death of A & S instead to Peter who, they say, either laid a curse on them or put them under unique 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 a human level, Luke clearly intends us to understand that it was a work of divine judgment. Once this has been accepted, there are at least three valuable lessons for us to learn.

First, 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 6:42) together with his warning that those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit (in deliberate defiance of known truth) will not be forgiven (Luke 12:10). Yet the sin of A&S was also against the Church. Is it intentional that Luke here uses for the first time the word Ekklesia (v11)? He thus affirms the continuity of the Christian Community with Gods redeemed and gathered people in the OT (LXX Joshua 8:35). Luke seems be underlining the great evil of sinning against Gods people. Falsehood ruins fellowship. If the hypocrisy of A & S has 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' (24:16). The 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' (1 John 1:7). Those who are part of the East African Revival and who lay great stress on this teaching, amusingly illustrate it by expressing their desire to 'live in a hose without ceilings or walls', that is, to permit nothing to come between them and either God or other people. It is this openness that A & S 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' (1 Corinthians 11:22/30), it came to be associated with excommunication (1 Corinthians 5:5, 1 Timothy 1:20). 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 (Matthew 18:15f). 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 are right to 'fence the table', that is, to make access to the Lords supper conditional. For, although the Lords Table is open to all sinners (who else either needs or wishes to come to it?!), it is open to penitent sinners.

No Hypocrisy, transparent lives, and the discipline of Discipleship: all will be essential signs to a watching community that we are serious about following Jesus and embodying His life in Canterbury and beyond. So we have now seen that, if the devils first tactic was to destroy the Church by force from without, his second tactic 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 must preserve its vigilance.

Pastor David

July 1st 2012