

Explore the Bible: Integrity

March 21, 2016

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for April 10 focuses on Acts 4:36-5:11.*

What's mine is yours (Acts 4:32-36)

The second chapter of Acts records the earliest days of the church as marked by worship, prayer, fellowship, devotion to the apostles' teaching and sharing with one another. It is difficult to say with any precision how much time passed between the events of Acts 2 and Acts 4, but it is very likely a significant period of time—anywhere from several months to several years. The believers' practice of sharing with one another so there was no one in need among them continued, and Luke highlights this practice as evidence of their unity of heart and mind. It is not a coincidence Luke mentions this practice in connection the apostles' ongoing witness to Jesus' resurrection, and to the presence of grace in their midst. For the apostles and the early church, Jesus' resurrection signaled a new way of life as well as specific beliefs. That way of life, inspired by the Spirit, was no less than loving the Lord and loving one's neighbor as oneself.

The early church was not establishing an economic system; they were living as a family. The practice of laying the money at the apostles' feet is another indication this action was intended as an act of worship, specifically as a sacrificial act. The believers continued to worship in the temple (Acts 2:46, 3:1, 5:12), but Luke does not record that they offered sacrifices there. It is very likely that from its earliest days the believers understood Jesus' death as the once-for-all sacrifice spoken of in Hebrews 10:10. Instead, they offered what they had to one another, with the apostles' administering the giving.

Barnabas receives special mention as one who sold property. Ancient

Christian tradition names him as one of the 70 disciples sent out by Jesus (Luke 10:1). Since their names are not recorded, it is impossible to say whether that is true or not, but it is an interesting possibility. “Barnabas” is in fact the nickname Joseph of Cyprus received from the apostles. It is easy to imagine the sort of person who would receive a nickname like that, and Barnabas will, of course, play a key role in the life of Paul and beginning mission work to Gentiles later in Acts.

That time those people died at church for lying (Acts 5:1-11)

So ... this is a weird story. There is no way around its uncomfortable presentation, which means it was and is intended to make its hearers squirm in their seats.

In the midst of what sounds like a “golden era” of the early church, a shadow appears. A couple conspires to gain some goodwill for themselves. Perhaps they wanted their own apostolic nicknames. More likely, they wanted the full recognition of being willing sacrificial givers, without the hassle of actually parting with all the money. Ananias walks the same path as Barnabas and goes through the same action. But the difference between the two gifts started in Ananias’ and Sapphira’s hearts.

Peter immediately calls Ananias out with a series of questions. The moment Ananias planned to be something he was not, he was no longer in “one heart and mind with all the believers” (Acts 4:32). If Ananias could have been honest with himself at that moment (or had a chance to answer the questions!) he might have admitted his heart was full of himself. He might have admitted he was motivated to get acclaim through false generosity and yet still cling to his own possessions. Peter, however, says it is Satan that has filled his heart. The motivation to deceive and to pass off selfishness as generosity did not just spring from Ananias. That idea ultimately came from God’s adversary. The lie, the masquerading of something impure as something pure, and the pride that though he could

get away with it have all the tell-tale marks of Satan himself. Ananias' lie to the church, then, is also a lie to the Holy Spirit and to God. Peter's next questions reveal the selling of possessions was completely voluntary. The sacrifices of the believers were Spirit-inspired to meet one another's needs, not something you were required to do as a Christian, whether you wanted to or not. The heart is the issue, and Ananias' heart was corrupted. So, Ananias died right then and there, and "great fear seized all who heard" (Acts 5:5). No kidding!

The pattern is then, of course, repeated with Sapphira, who at least had the chance to come clean. She chose instead to perpetuate the lie. Peter's "how could you!" is one of shock. How could you think the Spirit of the Lord wouldn't have something to say about this? Then, just as the young men assigned to burial detail for Ananias arrive back, they are sent back out again with Sapphira. That was probably not what they had expected to do that day.

We are not playing around

This is the only such incident specifically recorded in the New Testament. There is another reference to judgment within the church that might fit this pattern (1 Corinthians 11:27-32). The issue here again, is deception and selfishness vs. honesty and a sacrificial attitude towards others), but the intention of this story is certainly not to hang the threat of death over members of the church. This is an extreme example that highlights, close to the very beginning of the church, the seriousness of the holiness of the church. There are some stories in the Old Testament that recount the penalty of death for those who defiled what was intended to be sacred (1 Samuel 6:19, 2 Samuel 6:7—Both related to the ark of the covenant). There also are a multitude of rules in the Mosaic law about keeping pure the items and the people associated with worship in the tabernacle and the later temple.

This incident in Acts is an indication God is deadly serious about the *new* temple that is the membership of the church. The believers in Jesus Christ are a people set apart for God and for one another. An incredible amount of the New Testament seeks to teach believers this truth and to emphasize the need for honesty, the pure motivation of love, and the ongoing repentance of sins when needed for the people of God. The Holy Spirit is not playing around with the church. We are not a side project of God's. We are the Body of Christ. It *matters* how we meet one another's needs, how we seek unity of heart and mind, and how we represent ourselves in love and truth to one another and to God.