

“The Acts of the Exalted Jesus done in the Power of the Holy Spirit through His Apostolic Church”

The book of Acts...is a kind of vast treasure.

John Calvin

It is the most lyrical of books...Live in that book, I exhort you: it is a tonic, the greatest tonic I know of in the realm of the Spirit.

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones

There is nothing today’s church needs so much as to rediscover the doctrine, spirit, and commitments of the early Christian community.

James Boice

It’s not the sixteenth century gospel I’m interested in defending; what concerns me is the first-century gospel...The reason for the outpouring of the Spirit is not to make us feel spiritual. It is not to give us a spiritual high. It is so we can do the job that Jesus gave the church to do.

R.C. Sproul

A Birth Record, Not a Blueprint

Tendency to romanticize the Early Church, some nostalgically call it the ‘real’ church!

But, sadly, Acts reveals a church with rivalries, hypocrisy, immorality, failures, and heresies

Acts records the birth of the Church, but it is not an exact blueprint for today’s Church

The Apostolic Letter’s to churches (Romans – Revelation) give the clearest instruction of Christian belief and behavior in the post-Resurrection Church today. Some examples in Acts are repeated and reinforced in those epistles – priority of Word and Spirit, prayer, discipleship, leadership, opposition, and endurance. Other events in Acts are part of the unique ‘once for all’ establishment of the post-Pentecost church gathered under the authority of the ascended Lord Jesus – drawing lots for selecting leaders, phenomena in Jerusalem (mighty wind, flames over their heads, tongues?, healings?), Philip’s high-speed transition, prison openings, communal living. Can these happen again now? Surely, God is living and able! But these Scripturally recorded events had a unique purpose in confirming the reality of the Resurrection and the authority of the Scripture-writing Apostles.

Thus, when we hold the Bible in our hands it is God’s greatest miracle, in two ways. It records the mighty works of God, from creation to consummation; and it has been providentially protected and delivered to the Church with fully reliable accuracy today.

Context of Acts 5

Things are going very well in the Post-Pentecost Jerusalem church -

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles... Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2.43-47

When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Acts 3.9,10

But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

Acts 4.4

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all

Acts 4.31-33

Generosity, an evidence of the Spirit's work in the Christian, is essential to supply the advance of the Church...

Generous Community:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Acts 2.44,45

...there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Acts 4.34,35

Generous Christian:

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

Acts 4.36,37

Summary:

Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events

Acts 5.11

Acts 5.1-14

¹ 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.

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 just to human beings but to God."

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then some 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. 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 conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." 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. ¹² The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. ¹³ No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

Our text zooms in on one 'lay' couple in the congregation who were disciples of the Risen Lord Jesus, focusing on their dangerous thinking and deadly behavior.

Ananias = Mercy / Saphira = Beautiful

Wealthy, prominent, church members. Respected for their generous offering of land.

Their 'outward' appearance of holiness was quickly exposed by their 'inward' hypocrisy.

(If this 'Spirituality Scanner' was a 'blueprint' fixture in every Christian church, most of its members would be dead...at least I would be!)

1. Inward Attack

a. Self Deception – we think we can hide! "your sin will find you out!"

vs. 1,2 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 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.

Vs. 7-9 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price."

evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived
2 Timothy 3.13

no lie comes from the truth 1 John 2.21

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Hebrews 4.13

b. Satan's Delusion – devil does not MAKE us do something, but he cheers us on!

v. 3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. John 8.44

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 1 Peter 5.8

They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. Romans 1.25

c. Spirit Dishonored –Spirit who was given to glorify Jesus & reveal the Truth is grieved

vs. 3-4 you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 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 just to human beings but to God."

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

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.

John 16.13

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?

1 Corinthians 3.16

Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and honor him. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me."

Achan replied, "It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath."

So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the LORD.

Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold bar, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. Joshua said, "Why have you brought this trouble on us? The LORD will bring trouble on you today."

Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the LORD turned from his fierce anger. Therefore, that place has been called the Valley of Achor ever since.

Joshua 7.19-26

d. Sudden Death – one of the most 'exciting' church services in all of Church History!

v. 5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died.

v. 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.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6.23

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD
Leviticus 10.1,2

Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. 1 Timothy 6.9,10

2. Outward Advance

2 soldiers were slain by self-inflicted wounds, but the army of the Lord still advances....

- a. Danger for Sinners – sin of one brings shame on all / fall of one brings fear on all
 - vs. 5 And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.
 - v. 11 Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong; you destroy those who tell lies. The bloodthirsty and deceitful you, LORD, detest. Psalm 5.5,6

v. 13 No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.

He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. 1 Timothy 3.7

and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive. Titus 2.10

b. Deliverance from Sufferings - God is Sovereign in all He does, yet in this wrath God remembered mercy

vs. 12 The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.

"From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another." John 1.16

vs. 15,16, As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

c. Delight in the Savior – God of Might and Mercy

v. 14 Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him

Psalm 103.8-13

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 4.16

Applications to our Discipleship in the Church of the Risen Jesus today...

1. Tension between Individual and Community ‘Identity’

Our opinion of whether the treatment of Ananias and Sapphira was “right” will be partially determined by where we are on the Individual or Community ‘Identity’ spectrum. A strong “individualist” will think God was wrong or cruel in this act. Those who emphasize “community” may see this as a strong but necessary act of God for the purity of His church.

Church groups are comprised of people all along the spectrum. Today, speaking in generalities, Asians often submit and obey through a strong community loyalty. Individualistic Christians, like American anarchists, will do whatever they want to do. Good luck getting all our international small group members on the same page!

Discussion / Reflection Questions:

1. Where would you put yourself on the ‘individual and community identity’ spectrum?

2. Where would you place the members of your group on the ‘individual and community identity’ spectrum?

3. Is this an issue / identity that people in your group are thinking/talking about?

4. How might your group be more harmonious and Gospel-effective if your group had a better understanding of one another along this spectrum?

5. How can you curb / channel the zeal / leadership of the ‘individualists’ in your group to maximize the Gospel-effectiveness of both that person and every member of your group?

2. Freedom of the Individual in the Christian Community

Ananias and Sapphira were under no obligation to sell their property. Christianity is not communism where the State circumscribes private ownership. Indeed, Ananias and Sapphira did not even have to “open their home” for Christian purposes. Hospitality is a gift and a duty not widely practiced. As Peter says, once the property was sold, the profit was all theirs to distribute. They could have given any, all, or none of those proceeds to ‘the church.’ Yet they made a public promise to give all their sale of the proceeds to the church.

Freedoms come with responsibility. When we make choices, we limit our freedoms. If you chose to marry, you are ‘yoked’ to the welfare and well-being of that person for the rest of your life – even if you ‘divorce’ the memories and guilt of that yoke will remain. If you chose to create a child you become a responsible parent – even if you get an abortion, the life of that child will forever haunt your soul. Surrendering your freedom to the “Lord Jesus” means you “died” with Christ and now “live” in Him. He will challenge, and hopefully for Him and you, change your loves and your lifestyle. Free choices have forever consequences.

Discussion / Reflection Questions:

1. What is the difference between biblical ‘freedom’ and a license to sin?
2. How can we encourage sacrificial service even while we teach the truth of Christian freedom?
3. Are you convinced the Holy Spirit can move the members of the church to do all that He wants done without some legalistic/moralistic pressure? How will He do this?
4. Luke/Scripture is silent about how the people in the congregation, or at least the leaders of the congregation, knew about the amounts of money promised and given by Ananias and Sapphira. How do you think that info might have been communicated? Do we need to have more specific ‘money talk’ in our church? The individual/community spectrum impacts this question. Some Christians would argue, “that is none of your business!” While others are more open to making other’s business their business!
5. Do you think churches should have plaques honoring the ‘givers’ of rooms, buildings, books, etc.?

3. Truth in the Christian Community

It is not every day that you see two leading members of your church drop dead during the services. The news probably raced around Judea! Everyone had an opinion; opinions are like noses, everyone has one. Yet there is only one truth. People today claim to have “their truth.” But there is only one life-and-death-spoken-by-the-Holy-Spirit-to-the-apostles TRUTH. God’s truth is established and immovable now and forever.

Truth and Spirit work together. Therefore, God’s truth is living and life changing. We can know a person of truth by what they say and do. We can guess that Ananias and Sapphira, as prominent members of the congregation, had correct Gospel-truth in their heads. But they apparently did not have complete Gospel-transformation in their hearts. Neither do I...yikes!

God’s Spirit-breathed Truth is foundational to discipleship. Churches do many good things for people. Church people often make good friends. There are programs for youth and families, even seminars on finances, coping with loss, overcoming addictions, and parenting. Churches are often good places for music lovers. All these good activities, and many others, are ways a church can show God’s love for the world. But non-church people can do all these things too, and sometimes they do a better job of them. The main thing a church has, which the world does not have, is the Word of our God. Martin Luther made the point vividly, saying, “The Church is God’s mouthhouse.” The Word of God, empowered by the Spirit of God, and lived out by the people of God, is the greatest hope for our lost and dying world. Paul calls the church, “God’s household, the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1Timothy 3.15). “His [God’s] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known” (Ephesians 3.10). And, “You shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life” (Philippians 2.15,16). So, the Church of Jesus is founded on the Word, grows by the Word, and makes the Word known.

Discussion / Reflection Questions:

1. Do different ‘theological opinions/traditions’ sometimes seem like ‘different truths’?
2. How can we stand on ‘one truth from God’ even while we spar about how to correctly interpret the truth?
3. “I don’t understand this part of the Bible” is a ‘family’ challenge. But, “I cannot accept this part of the Bible!” can drive us out of the family! Family members agree ‘Father knows best’ even when we don’t know why...and it is hard to accept!
4. How can we be bold and courageous for ‘truth’ and at the same time humble and kind?
5. How can we ‘pick our battles’ for truth? Is every hill worth dying on? When should we engage and when should we evade?
6. How can we hold these commands together? – “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes” (Proverbs 26.4,5).

4. Unity in the Church

With all the diversity, sinful rebellion, and individual freedoms among its members, only the power of the Holy Spirit can unite a church. Sadly, many modern churches focus on unique gifts and blessings from the Spirit (tongues, prophecies, visions, experiences) – which may all be true and real. But, true or not, they often promote ‘individual experience’ and create ‘super-Christians’ which then further divides the members of the church. As we see from our text, when the Spirit of God works, there is unity – even a fearful awe.

When there is agreement on the main truths the Holy Spirit has revealed – Scripture as the final authority and Jesus as the only Savior; Spirit-given love and humility in the hearts of church members; and Spirit-empowerment for the mission of the church - to ‘fight’ the world, flesh, and the devil (instead of our fellow church members); then the church will edify the saints, evangelize sinners, and glorify the Savior as intended.

The Ananias and Sapphira event could have divided the church. But we see how God orchestrated all the opinions, hearts, and events to unify the church and advance the Gospel in the fear of God. “And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed” (Acts 5.14-16).

Discussion / Reflection Questions:

1. Is a church really ‘united’ when there are disagreements with the group?
2. What are the disagreements in a church that divide and what are the ones that we can live with?
3. Can we disagree without being disagreeable?
4. What specific steps can/should be taken by churches to show the “one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us all” to the watching world?

5. Judgment in the Community

The first coming of Jesus inaugurates an era of mercy. The deadly wrath we all deserve was poured out on the Crucified One. His return will be an awesome display of judgment – triumph for those who trust Him, and torment for those who refuse to believe.

On a few occasions in the history of redemption we can see a ‘present manifestation’ of ‘future wrath,’ such as the death of Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu, the annihilation of the Canaanites by Joshua’s troops, Uzzah killed as he touched God’s Ark, and Ananias and Sapphira. Each of these unusual outpourings of immediate judgment occurred at a time of ‘beginnings’ – the formation of the nation of Israel, entrance into the Promise Land, the inauguration of David’s Kingship, and the early days of the Church. In each case the shock made it clear that the true and living God is to be feared and followed by the clear teaching of His Word.

Praise the Lord for His mercy in withholding His wrath in our day. We are no better than Ananias and Sapphira, Nadab and Abihu, or even the Canaanites! Thus, we need to walk humbly before God and man. God forgive us for our haughtiness and pride! And let us not be complacent, justice delayed does not mean justice denied. The most important point of life is to be sure that you and those you love are “hidden” in Christ, who bore our wrath, against that final terrible day of the Lord.

Discussion / Reflection Questions:

1. Where do we look for justice? Church Elders? Governors? Courts? Parents? God?
2. How often do you pray for justice in this horribly unjust world? If God answered your prayers how would that look?
3. How different/similar to God’s view of justice is your own view of justice?
4. Is God’s judgment going to be revealed only on the final day, or is it also being poured out today? What about natural disasters? Pandemics? Famine? War? Is it ‘just’ that so many ‘innocent people’ die in these tragedies?
5. Can God be loving and send people to hell?

6. Salvation by Grace through Faith

Scripture is silent about the eternal destiny of Ananias and Sapphira. My hope is that they are in heaven, but that is just my inference from the Gospel. Their prominent positions in the church meant they were seen as believers in the Risen Jesus. Luke notes that unbelievers were afraid to join, “None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem” (Acts 5.13). Salvation does not mean instant sanctification, sadly! Christian hypocrites and liars still fill our churches today. I am one! Yet the blood of Jesus cleanses from all sin, hallelujah! The only ‘unforgivable’ sin is rejecting the gift of salvation in Jesus, not lying and hypocrisy. So, if they believed in Jesus, Ananias and Sapphira took a high-speed train to Glory.

As we reflect on our own imperfect lives, and too often exaggerate the imperfections of others, let us look with Gospel clarity. Our ultimate need is salvation. What keeps us separated from God is sin. And only the death and resurrection of Jesus has conquered sin. Let us make sure the Gospel is of “first importance.” As we live in community, our job is not to detect sin but to delight in salvation. Freely we have received, now freely give. I hope the Jerusalem church members had a more humble view of themselves and a kinder view of others after that big day. “But for the grace of God” I could be carried out of the church dead!

Discussion / Reflection Questions:

1. Do you think salvation by grace through faith is ‘just and fair’?
2. Are there not some sins that are unforgivable? ...or at least should be!
3. Do you think if Adolph Hitler prayed the ‘sinner’s prayer’ just before blowing his brains out he will be in heaven? If he is there, would you be happy for him to be your neighbor in the ‘mansion’ right next to yours?
4. Charles Swindoll, an American pastor, has said there will be three surprises for us in Heaven; first, who is there, second, who is not there, and third, that we are there! Thoughts?

Mark and Dayna Blair
29 May 2021

<http://www.pastormarkblair.org/>

Sermon on Acts 5.1-6 – “*Hey! Look at Me! ... Dead!?!?*”

Audio: http://www.pastormarkblair.org/downloads/New_Testament/20110410-Hey!LookAtMe!...Dead!_-!-MarkBlair.mp3

Notes: http://www.pastormarkblair.org/downloads/New_Testament/20110410-LookatMeDead-MarkBlair.pdf