



The life of the early church

Acts 4:32-5:16

The life of the early church was difficult but beautiful. Almost immediately the rulers of the people laid hands on the believers. Some were imprisoned. Soon some would pay for their faith with their lives. However, the life in the church was also very beautiful, and many, in later times, have longed for the type of life enjoyed by the early Christians. There was an unmarred unity for a while. The church soon took the center position in their lives. Everything was beautifully simple!

Real unity

As the multitude of people came together they were "*of one heart and soul.*" This fact in itself would surely impress all those who did not belong to their company. Where is this world ever able to find such unity? However, this unity is broadened out. It is not only spiritual but it also reveals itself in other ways. At the close of the second chapter we already read of the fact that the believers had all things common and this is now reiterated. Of course, not much time had elapsed between the time of the second chapter and that which is recorded here. But, they kept it up! It was not a fleeting way of life.

Right in the middle of the discussion of the community of goods, Luke now tells us that the Apostles witnessed to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the most important element in the life of the early church. It is essentially a mission church. This means that powerful preaching must characterize it. Grace was upon them all to receive the word preached and to live lives accordingly.

There was no lack in any household. It is the ideal state of the people of Israel of which Moses had spoken in Deuteronomy 15:4. Those who had possessions simply sold them for the benefit of those who did not have enough. Lands and houses were sold. People "rob" themselves to benefit the body of believers. The proceeds from the sales is laid at the feet of the Apostles and it is left to them to distribute these monies as the need arises. They keep doing this. What a beautiful relationship! Is it too good to last?

Now the author gives us an actual example of this kind of behavior. There was this man Joseph, later known as Barnabas, who sells his property and brings it to the Apostles for the welfare of the church. A Levite might not own property in Israel (the Lord was his inheritance) except in foreign lands or in the 48 cities which had been given them together with the surrounding land (Numbers 18:20-24 and Numbers 35:1-8). It is not enough that we simply make reference to Old Testament texts, because many of the rules of the past were no longer observed. The emphasis here, however, rests on his love and generosity. He was indeed a "*Son of consolation.*" He was "*an Israelite in whom there was no guile.*" He is a beautiful exhibition of love in the life of the early church. How different the spirit was only a short time later in Corinth! But, here it did not last very long either. In chapter six we have quite a different picture.

Fraud enters

One must not receive the impression that the life of the early church gives us a picture of people who are nearing perfection. Far from it. There is real evil in the hearts of some of those who belong to the early church and this is a far greater danger than the persecution from without. The desire for honor and plain human greed is found among the earliest members of the church. The names

of Ananias and Sapphira will go down in infamy in the history of the church. People such as Barnabas were held in honor. All the people were grateful to such people because they alleviated the needs of others. Ananias and Sapphira also have property. "Let us sell it and give it for the welfare of the church. Yet, not all of it but only a part. Who has to know that it is only a part?" The spirit of Judas has not died with him. They bring this certain part of the sale to the Apostles. However, Peter has such a measure of the Spirit that he is able to recognize the evil which is being done. These people are acting like Achan, and this would affect the entire church.

When the money is brought to the Apostles Ananias receives neither praise nor thanks. Instead there are several probing questions. Why has Satan filled your heart to do this? Don't say: the devil made me do it! This is a trick of some sick spirituality. Peter tells his readers in his first epistle to withstand the devil (1 Peter 5:19). That can be done. Ananias did not do it. He allowed Satan to influence him and to take over so that he now lies to God! In verse 3 the Apostle speaks of the lie against the Holy Spirit and in the following verse he says that they have lied to God. Here is another clear proof of the deity of the Holy Spirit.

In verse 4 the questions continue. Each question is as a hammer blow. While the property was yours you were not compelled to do anything with it. Peter does not speak of compulsory giving. Even after he sold it he could do with the proceeds whatever he pleased. He could keep all of it, he could give part of it or all of it. But, don't lie about it and say that you are bringing the whole sum to the church when this is not the case! How could you ever attempt to do such a thing?

God's judgment and discipline

Ananias had come to the Apostles thinking that he too would be placed in the category of those who were held in honor in the church and at the same time they would be able to enjoy part of the proceeds of the sale for themselves. No one can do this. When he heard the accusatory questions of Peter, it became evident that he was fooling no one. Instead, he falls dead at the Apostle's feet. Is the punishment too severe? Some think so. Great fear comes over all the people. They had all been witnesses to that which happened. Some of the younger men who are members of the church take up the body and bury it immediately.

About three hours later Sapphira comes to the meeting of the assembly. She doesn't know what has happened. No one was sent to inform her. She is asked by Peter whether they had indeed sold the property for the sum which had been brought to Peter. He gives her an opportunity to back out. She has the opportunity to repent. Are there no warning bells ringing in her mind and heart when she hears this question? Seemingly not. They have consented together to pull off this deceit. How is it possible that they have agreed together to "*try the Spirit of the Lord?*" No one can do this with impunity. The young men who have buried your husband are ready to carry you out! Again, very severe punishment. Seemingly the same young men who buried Ananias now have the second burial of the day because she falls dead at the Apostle's feet. Again we read that great fear came upon all, i.e., upon the whole church and all who heard about it. Everything had been so beautiful until now. The people must realize that they are dealing with holy things. Their own history has made it very clear what happens to those who lose sight of the holiness of the things of God. Nadab and Abihu lay false or strange fire on the Altar and die. Uzzah seeks only to steady the ark and dies. God is a consuming fire.

Separation and growth

But, let *fear* not be the dominating trait in the life of the early church. The author goes on immediately to speak of all the signs and wonders which were done by the hands of the Apostles. The people all came together at Solomon's porch. They sought each other's company. Being the true church, they sought the communion of saints.

However, let no one mistake the true nature of the church. We now read the remarkable statement that of the rest no one dared to join the church. Where have you ever heard of such a thing? These people realize that this church is one that has to be taken seriously. It is not a club. It is a very dangerous institution. Everything is not all love and peace in that church. Its fellowship is also a

very dangerous place. Fire flies out of that church! Where the true word is brought; where the Spirit of God reigns; there is the true church, the true body of Christ. The experience of Ananias and Sapphira lingers long in the minds of the people.

Although *"of the rest no one dared to join the church,"* the church did not cease to grow. Some have thought that Luke is here speaking in contradictions when he says that believers were the more added to the Lord. This is not a contradiction; it is the natural outcome. Many do not dare join the church because they are afraid. No one may trifle with this church. This, however, does not restrict true believers from joining her. Because the church is the church, multitudes are added! Large groups of both men and women join the church which has the true preaching of the word and which exercises true discipline. This the true believer wants and must have. The church has been founded to supply precisely those needs.

The miracles which were done by the Apostles must have been without number. Such miraculous powers accompany Peter's work that people are placed in those places where he might walk so that his shadow may pass over them. He doesn't even have to touch them. The tenor of the passage leads us to believe that these were healed. They even bring people from distances outside of Jerusalem to receive healing at the hands of the Apostles. They had prayed for this (Acts 4:30) and their prayer was answered.

What an influence went out from that early church! Soon persecution will drive them away from Jerusalem, but Jerusalem will know that mighty deeds have been done in her and that all these deeds stem from the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom she crucified and whom God raised from the dead!

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Questions for discussion:

1. How does Luke make it clear that the community of goods was not the most important thing in the church but rather the preaching of the word?
2. In how far are we to "rob" selves for the benefit of the church?
3. Is compulsory giving ever approved in Scripture? Give reasons.
4. Why were Ananias and Sapphira punished so severely while many of those who commit similar sins later were not?
5. Is anyone afraid to join the church today? Should they be?
6. How does the present day church measure up to the early church? Are the differences important?