

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

The First Church Scandal

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Acts 5:1-11

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 5:1-11; that’s on page 913 in the pew Bibles. This morning we are going to be talking about the first scandal in church history. It wasn’t reported on by a Roman Newspaper, it wasn’t exposed by Social Media users, it was narrated, transparently, in the pages of Scripture. We’re talking of course, about the tragic story of Ananias and Sapphira – a story that many of us wish wasn’t in the Bible. It certainly doesn’t “help the cause”, it doesn’t portray the church in a positive light, it would not be the go to text for a fund raising campaign – rather it seems to suggest that people in the church can be jealous, petty and deceitful and it introduces a note of judgment and wrath that we were almost tempted to think was a thing of the past now that we have moved over into the New Testament.

It is a hard story to read – but we’re getting good at reading hard stories about the church, aren’t we?

A few weeks ago Christianity Today released an article reviewing their Top 20 Stories In 2022. 7 of those top 20 stories had to do with scandal and serious misconduct in the church. There were stories about sexual abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention, stories about attempts to cover up that abuse at the highest levels of power, there were stories about Pastors engaged in

inappropriate relationships, and presidents of schools and seminaries acting more like gangsters and political hacks than men of God – it was NOT a great year for the church.

And yet, one of the funny things about the church is that WE tell these stories ABOUT OURSELVES! This article I refer to was not printed in the pages of Time Magazine, nor did it appear on BUZZ FEED or The Huffington Post – it was published by Christianity TODAY – what we used to refer to as the FLAGSHIP of evangelical journalism.

WE WRITE THESE STORIES.

WE shine the light on our own warts and wounds.

Why do we do that?

We do it because we were told to live in the light – and we do it because we are following the example of Scripture. The Bible tells the story of Abraham and Hagar. The Bible tells the story of David and Bathsheba and the Bible tells the story of Ananias and Sapphira. And so we will read it and with the help of the Holy Spirit we will endeavour to reflect and resolve appropriately.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1.

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property,² and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.³ But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?"⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God."⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.⁸ And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much."⁹ But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out."¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they

found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. (Acts 5:1–11 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

With your Bible still open in front of you, let me just remind you of the wider context for this story. Our last message in this series before we took our Christmas break covered the remarkable story of generosity narrated at the end of chapter 4. The Holy Spirit was moving so powerfully in the early church that people were being inspired to give in incredible ways. They were selling property and possessions – and laying the proceeds at the Apostles’ feet so that the money could be used for the furtherance of the church’s mission. The story of Barnabas in particular was highlighted. He sold a piece of land that belonged to him and he laid the entire purchase price at the feet of the Apostles.

That act was celebrated.

That story was told!

That story made it into the Bible!

And that fact stirred up jealousy and ambition in the heart of Ananias and Sapphira. That’s the connection between the stories. The SIN in this story was not failing to give 100% of the purchase price; the sin in this story was PETTY JEALOUSY and a desire for vain glory. Ananias and Sapphira engaged in HYPOCRISY on a grand scale.

Now, I don’t think this story is in our Bibles so that we can preach the mirror opposite of the sermon we preached a few weeks ago, rather I think the intention here is for us to be impacted in a GENERAL WAY by the presence of sin and scandal IN A CHURCH in which the Holy Spirit is so obviously alive and at work.

This is a GUT PUNCH and a WAKE UP CALL and it should summon us to reflection and resolve. So let’s do that; let’s begin with the matter of reflection.

Reflections:

Zooming out and considering the message of this passage as a whole I think it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that:

1. As long as there is sin in us there will be scandal and misconduct in the church

The church is not a collection of perfect people – rather it is an assembly of REDEEMED people who are being RENEWED by one degree of glory to the next. So, until that process is completed, there will be remaining sin in each of us, and that will represent an opening for the devil to exploit. That seems to be the message here.

Look at what Peter says to Ananias in verse 3. He says:

“Ananias, why has **Satan** filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?” (Acts 5:3 ESV)

So SATAN plays a role in this story – but that is certainly not to say that Ananias and Sapphira are guiltless – far from it. Look at the end of verse 4:

“Why is it that **you have contrived** this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.” (Acts 5:4 ESV)

So CLEARLY Ananias is ultimately responsible for this deceitful scheme – even though it was suggested to him by the influence of Satan. How exactly does that work? The Apostle James puts it this way, he says:

“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed **by his own desire**.¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” (James 1:14–15 ESV)

So James actually uses the analogy of conception. He says the EGG is our own DESIRE. And the SEED is the suggestion of the devil – but there would be no sin – no temptation even – without the EGG of our desire.

Therefore, the more disordered desires, the more unchecked ambitions, the more unrebuked petty jealousies you harbour in your heart, the more opportunities there will be for demonic suggestion and the more footholds there will be for the devil to climb into your life and through you and through me into the life of the church.

Mark it down brothers and sisters: as long as there is sin in us there will be scandal and misconduct in the church.

Secondly, as we consider this story as a whole it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that:

2. Sins in the church are judged with particular severity and harshness

This story FEELS like it better belongs in the pages of the Old Testament, doesn't it? In fact, commentators universally point out the similarities between this story and the story of Achan in Joshua 7.

Do you remember that?

In Joshua 7 we have the unexpected story of Israel's defeat by the city of Ai. I say "unexpected" because Ai was a small city and Israel had just defeated THE LARGE CITY of Jericho. We learn about that great victory in Sunday School. The people march around the city, they blow the trumpets, the walls fall down and the city perishes. So if the people of Israel can defeat JERICHO then little old Ai ought to be no problem. But of course, things didn't work out that way. Israel was ROUTED and they were forced to turn tail and run!

Joshua, was understandably upset. He went to God and asked him what in the world was going on – and God said that there was sin in the camp. Someone had stolen items from the city of Jericho – which was supposed to have been completely devoted to destruction. God wanted to position that military action as an act of DIVINE JUDGMENT – not as an act of rapacious violence so he had FORBIDDEN the soldiers to take any spoil – but someone had disobeyed. Someone had lied. Someone had presented himself as a Holy Warrior when in fact he was a common thief.

So Joshua assembled the tribes and by casting lots discovered that the name of the thief was Achan. Joshua confronted him and said:

“Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD brings trouble on you today.” And all Israel stoned him with stones. They burned them with fire and stoned them with stones.²⁶ And they raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day. Then the LORD turned from his burning anger. (Joshua 7:25–26 ESV)

Wow.

That seems harsh to us.

We don't often associate the death penalty with thievery – but that's the thing: Achan was representing the Lord – and when you represent the Lord – when you step out as part of the Lord's Army – you are held to a much higher standard.

And that is what is going on here in the story of Ananias and Sapphira. The early church was trying to present itself as the New Israel inside the Old Israel. They were making a bold claim. They were saying, “WE ARE the redeemed and assembled people of God. All those of us who have been SAVED by Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit – we are the covenant community”.

Well – if you are going to say things like that then prepare yourself to be held to a much higher standard. Old Testament and New, judgment begins with the household of God.

Thirdly, as we contemplate this very difficult story, we are reminded that:

3. Progress in the church is often hampered and impeded by regression

This story powerfully illustrates the fact that the history of the church has always been – and will always be until the Lord returns – a story of two steps forward, one step back. F.F. Bruce says in his commentary here:

“The story of Ananias is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In both narratives an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God.”¹

That’s true, isn’t it? Wouldn’t the Book of Acts be a better book if it just SKIPPED this story entirely? Wouldn’t it be better if we went DIRECTLY from the story of Barnabas’ generosity into the story of all the incredible healings and miracles recorded in Acts 5:12-16? That’s how I’d write the story – but then it wouldn’t be true would it? And it wouldn’t be helpful, either because such a depiction would inevitably give rise to unrealistic expectations.

The Bible is bracingly honest – at least it is if you read it.

You see, I think part of the problem right now is that far too many of us in the evangelical church are walking around this world “UNBRACED” by the truthfulness of Scripture. Our biblical illiteracy has made us fundamentally unstable. For the first time in 5 generations on this continent the tide of Christianity appears to be going out – and so we are all clutching our pearls and wringing our hands – as if this hasn’t happened a dozen or more times over the course of our history. Sometimes the visible church gets a little too big for its britches, sometimes there are too many people in our ranks who are not true believers. Sometimes it is so advantageous to be a Christian that a great number of people come in for the wrong reasons – and when that happens, scandal, judgment and declension are right around the corner.

But because God is fundamentally committed to his people – judgment and declension are never given the last word. G.K. Chesterton said famously:

“Christendom has had a series of revolutions and in each one of them Christianity has died. Christianity has died many times and risen again: for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.”²

Brothers and sisters, the fact that we are taking “one step back” right now, in this culture, does not mean that we are on death’s door, rather it more likely means that we are being prepared for a great leap forward.

¹F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts: The English Text With Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, in *The New London Commentary On The New Testament* (Marshall/Morgan/Scott/Eerdmans, 1954), 110. (As cited in Stott).

² G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Radford: Wilder Publications, 2008), 162.

That leads us to our fourth reflection; it does press home to us the fact that the judgment of God – painful as it is – very often positions the church for a season of fruitfulness and advance.

4. The judgment of God positions the church for a season of fruitfulness and advance

The judgement of God upon the covenant community is never to kill them, rather it is to cure them. Times of great power are often preceded by seasons of severe pruning. We see that same basic pattern in the Old Testament story of Achan. God said to Joshua:

“You cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you.” (Joshua 7:13 ESV)

God HALTED their progress, not because he intended to abandon them, but because he intended to be with them. He sat them down so that they could DEAL with the sin in their midst. But the end goal was always power and victory – and that is exactly what we see in that story. Once they dealt with their sin and reconsecrated their community, the Lord again blessed them and worked through them a great triumph over their enemies.

So it is here in Acts 5. Once the sin in the covenant community had been dealt with – the power of the Lord returned in spectacular fashion. In the very next verse after this story, the Bible says:

Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. (Acts 5:12 ESV)

On the other side of this painful event, there was power and there was unity – thanks be to God!

I anticipate that we will experience something very similar in the church over the next 10 years. The last 3 years have produced perhaps the most SEVERE PRUNING in evangelical history. COVID knocked an awful lot of people out of the church. Some got caught up in the politics, others simply lost the habit – either way experts estimate that the evangelical church in North America shrunk by somewhere between 20-30%. And then there were the scandals and the associated exodus and deconstruction.

Where does that leave us?

I would argue it leaves us LEANER, CHASTENED, STRONGER and more COMMITTED. I would argue it leaves us a church positioned for power and advance.

Resolutions:

So how should we respond, personally, to a story of this nature? As I mentioned off the top, I think this story is in the Bible less to be parsed and more to be pondered. We are supposed to ask the question: what does this mean and how should I respond? As your pastor, and as a fellow church member, let me suggest 3 resolutions that I believe represent a wise and productive response to this text.

The first one is this:

1. Resolve to rigorously audit all desires, motivations, and ambitions

Remember, this entire episode began with unchecked petty jealousy in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira. When they saw how everyone looked at Barnabas after he did what he did to supply and resource the church A DESIRE emerged in their heart that ought not to have been nurtured in the dark – but it was. And it opened a door for demonic suggestion. The devil is constantly probing your heart searching for leverage and footholds. Your job is to identify and close off each and every one of those access points.

Do you struggle with lust? Starve it.

Do you struggle with pride? Abase it.

Do you struggle with anger? Rebuke it.

Paul told the Ephesians:

“Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”
(Ephesians 4:26–27 NIV11)

Every distorted or disordered desire you allow to grow in your heart becomes a foothold for the devil to get inside of you and through into the church. So find them and destroy them - for your health and safety and for ours.

Then secondly, I think it would be appropriate to respond to this story by resolving to be less destabilized by sin and weakness in the church.

2. Resolve to be less destabilized by sin and weakness in the church

Now, to be clear, I don't mean that you should be less outraged. When sin is revealed in the church it should be handled with all appropriate severity. Covering it up or sweeping it under the rug is a fool's errand – because one way or another your sin will find you out. You can confess it yourself, or you can leave it God's Providence to expose – but you can be sure of this: the Lord will not tolerate hidden sin in the household of God. So when sin happens – deal with it appropriately. Private sins between members can be dealt with according to Matthew 18. As for the leaders, when they persist in sin, Paul says:

“rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.” (1 Timothy 5:20 ESV)

We don't sin in the household of God. We don't protect the leaders. We insist on a high standard of evidence – but if there is persistent sin then there needs to be public rebuke. The stories have to be told. Abusers and deceivers have to be held accountable. Restitution has to be made. Lessons have to be learned. Policies and protections must be put in place.

So to be clear –I think we need to take sin far MORE seriously in the church – but I don't think we should be destabilized by it.

Let me speak as clearly and as straightforwardly as possible. What I am saying is this: when the pastor of some church in Texas – or some church in Orillia – does something sinful, abusive, unkind or unwise – that doesn't make God any more or less Sovereign over the universe and it does not make Jesus any less the Savior of the world.

Sin and scandal can make you sad, it can make you angry, but it should not shake your faith.

Whether the person sitting next to you right now is a good person or a person I can tell you this: God is a Holy God and Jesus is a beautiful Savior – can you say amen to that?

If the presence of sin in the church destabilizes your faith – then I would argue, you need to re-evaluate your faith, because the church is not a museum for finished works of art, the church is a hospital for broken and bleeding people in process. People don't become Christians because they are better than other people – people become Christians because they know they are broken and they need to be healed and restored by Jesus and that takes time.

So yah – sometimes church is messy. Sometimes sin gets out of check, sometimes people are put in leadership who ought not to be and sometimes the devil gains a foothold and whole congregations lose their way.

That does happen – but that should not shock you and it should not rock you in your faith – not if you've read the Bible.

Now, if safeguards weren't in place, and if lessons aren't learned and if sin by the leadership is covered up and swept under the rug, I can buy that as an argument for leaving a particular church, but it makes no sense as an argument for abandoning Christianity as a whole.

So moving forward, in 2023 and beyond, let's resolve to be less DESTABILIZED by the presence of sin and weakness in the church. Let's hate sin, let's war against sin, let's deal honestly and appropriately with sin – but let's not pretend as though the continuing existence of sin is somehow an argument for or against the existence of God or for or against the glory and sufficiency of Christ. Because it's not – it's just where we are in the story.

And then lastly, I think it would be wise for us to respond to this story by resolving to be more mindful of the kindness AND severity of God.

3. Resolve to be more mindful of the kindness and severity of God

Somehow, at some point, Ananias and Sapphia lost sight of the character of God. In Acts 5:9 Peter says:

“How is it that you have agreed **together to test the Spirit of the Lord**? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” (Acts 5:9 ESV)

To test God means to TEST HIS REPOSE – it means to see how much we can get away with in the household of God. “What in the world possessed you to play such a dangerous game?”, Peter says. “Who do you think you are? More importantly, who do you think God is?” That’s what Peter is asking in Acts 5 – and that’s what we all ought to be asking as evangelicals as we survey the train wreck that was 2022. Who do we think we are? And who do we think God is?

That’s a good question. The Apostle Paul reminded his people to think about that, he said:

Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. (Romans 11:22 ESV)

Let me read that again: otherwise you too will be cut off.

I suspect that’s why this story about Ananias and Sapphira is in the Bible. It is there to remind us that not everyone who was enjoying the high time in Acts 4 survived to experience the great power and advance that we read about at the end of Acts 5.

Some people were cut off.

Because before God empowers the church, he prunes the church.

Because the Bride of Christ must reflect the character of Christ.

And because the Spirit of the Lord is holy, holy, holy – thanks be to God!

Let’s pray together.