

3. The account of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11) is a continuation of the preceding context, although the chapter break may give a different impression. (Chapter and verse assignments were made a long time after the composition of the biblical writings and provide no reliable insight into the structure and flow of any particular text.)
- The first indication of this continuation is Luke's use of a Greek particle that acts to conjoin two sentences or passages. It does so by setting them in direct comparison, either as complementary or contrasting elements. Where the former is intended, the particle is usually translated with the conjunctives *and*, *also*, or *now*; where the latter, English employs the conjunction *but* or *however*. Luke was clearly drawing a sharp contrast in these two sub-contexts (4:32-37, 5:1-11), and most major English versions capture this meaning.
 - The second indication is the transitional passage of 4:34-37. Luke had described in broad terms the way the members of the Church regarded the things of which their lives consisted (4:32). He then provided an illustration, noting that Christians who had real estate holdings were selling their properties as needed to supply the lack of others (4:34-35). From there he gave a specific example in the person of Barnabas (4:36-37). That example leads naturally into Luke's consideration of two other individuals who also sold property and donated the proceeds.

The way Luke introduced this passage indicates continuation with the preceding section, but the passage itself reveals the matter and thrust of that continuation: Luke intended his friend Theophilus (the man for whom he penned his account) to find a direct and startling contrast between Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira and their respective offerings. He described the two parties' transactions with similar language (cf. 4:37 with 5:1-2), but also highlighted the important and determinative distinctions between them.

Some have believed that the key to those distinctions is in various textual nuances:

- Luke's language suggests that Barnabas sold an agricultural plot whereas Ananias and Sapphira sold only a generic piece of property – possibly part of an inherited estate. The idea, then, is that Barnabas gave a valuable, income-generating asset – one that perhaps contributed to his personal livelihood, whereas his counterparts surrendered only an inherited property of minimal practical value.
- Luke also distinguished between the two parties' presentation of their proceeds. In the case of Barnabas, Luke employed a preposition that indicates he laid his offering directly at the feet of the apostles; with Ananias and Sapphira, he used a different preposition suggesting that they set their gift to the side of their feet. This distinction is thought to highlight Barnabas' whole-hearted eagerness in his gift in contrast to Ananias' and Sapphira's reluctance: Barnabas was giving out of a sincere heart; his counterparts gave out of a sense of reluctant compulsion that arose from the social pressure of others making such public gifts. Barnabas was giving out of love for Christ and His Church; Ananias and Sapphira gave out of love for themselves and their own image and reputation among the saints.

While such textual nuances are not irrelevant, they aren't determinative; Luke's meaning in this passage must be determined from the larger context – not just the preceding section, but the structure and thrust of Luke's presentation thus far (ultimately considered within the entire narrative). That broader view yields some significant observations.

First of all, it's clear that Luke intended Barnabas to provide a personal "face" to his description of the Church. Barnabas epitomized the community of believers as a fellowship bound together, not by externals such as culture or creed, but as "*one heart and soul*" – a community authentically living out its identity as one body joined together by their mutual share in Christ's life and Spirit. Joseph was his given name, but the saints had come to call him *Barnabas* – "son of encouragement" – because they found him to be a man characterized by genuine love and concern for the saints; a man occupied with using all of his life's substance in the service and edification of Christ's people.

Barnabas was a "son of encouragement," not because he had a cheerful, optimistic disposition and a way of making other Christians feel better about their lives and circumstances, but because he labored to see them built up in Christ.

Barnabas encouraged the saints in their faith, hope, love and joy; he would later promote Paul's reception by the Church and serve Christ's goal of a unified, global Church by laboring in the volatile Gentile mission (9:26ff, 11:19ff, 13:1ff, 15:1ff; cf. also 15:35-39). He encouraged Christ's people in the way that Christ does: by His gospel in the power of His good Spirit (cf. Luke 2:25; Romans 15:4-5; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; Philippians 2:1ff; 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17; Hebrews 6:9-20, 12:1-6, 13:20-22). It was from that perspective and motivation that he sold his property and presented the proceeds to the apostles.

Ananias and Sapphira, on the other hand, personified what the Church becomes and manifests when it fails to fulfill its identity and calling. They were professors of Christ whose mindset and resultant actions lied against the truth of their profession. They epitomized those whose witness of Christ is effectively a false witness – first in the Church, but also in the world.

The saints had petitioned God to grant them courage and constancy in their witness to Christ and make that witness fruitful by attending it with His Spirit. God answered their plea, not only by bestowing what they sought, but also by making them a beacon of light in an alienated and darkened world (Philippians 2:1-5; 1 Peter 2:9-10). More than their oral proclamation of the gospel, the saints' lives in loving community testified of Christ and His new creation to those who observed them. Without that living testimony, their proclamation was stripped of its power and made liable to contempt and ridicule.

God is clearly concerned to provide for the temporal needs of His people, and those who share in Christ's life and Spirit will care for their Christian brethren. But the Father has a larger goal than that: *He intends that the Church's mutual love will bear witness to His Son and the gospel of His triumphal, all-transforming work of redemption.* Bearing false witness, not greed or stinginess, was Ananias and Sapphira's grave and fatal offense.

- a. Luke first indicated this by noting the couple's *conspiracy* in holding back part of the price of their land (5:1-2). Their withholding wasn't inadvertent or spontaneous; they determined ahead of time, and in full agreement, to not give to the Church all of the proceeds of the sale.

Ananias and Sapphira agreed to keep part of the sale price for themselves, but this prior arrangement didn't constitute a conspiracy; they were perfectly free to use the property and its proceeds however they saw fit. Their conspiracy lay in their mutual decision to *deceive*. The context clearly shows that the couple, in presenting their gift to the apostles, intentionally gave the impression that it represented the entire price of their property (ref. 5:7-8).

- b. Peter confronted Ananias and his wife in their deception, and his rebuke illumines the pair's actual offense, its significance, and why God punished it so severely. First of all, it demonstrates that God doesn't call His people to renounce private property in favor of a communal existence (5:4a). Ananias and Sapphira would have been completely blameless should they have chosen to retain ownership of their property. And having decided to sell it, they still had every right to use the proceeds however they deemed best. They were under no righteous obligation either to sell their land or to hand over all (and any) of what they received for it.

Peter's rebuke also shows that their offense wasn't reluctance or insincerity in their giving. True, in a sense they were giving with one hand while holding on with the other, but this duplicity in itself didn't provoke God's indignation. He punished them for *misrepresenting* their offering. Laying their gift at the apostles' feet, they testified to the Church that it comprised the entire proceeds of their property; such guile utterly contradicts a community united in one heart and soul.

They had deceived the saints, yet Peter didn't assign that as their guilt; *rather, he insisted that they had lied to the Holy Spirit, and so to God Himself* (5:3, 4b). That charge makes an important contribution to Luke's developing message in Acts:

- Because of their intrinsic relation to the triune God, what Christians do always implicates the Father, Son and Spirit. This is true not simply because they align themselves with God in their profession of faith, but more importantly and substantially because they share in the divine life and likeness through their union with the Father and the Son by the indwelling, transforming presence of the Spirit (Colossians 3:1-4). Moreover, because Christians are the "dwelling of God in the Spirit," bearing false witness to the saints is bearing false witness to God.
- But Ananias and Sapphira also lied to God in that their gift to the apostles was their gift to Him. Their offering was "holy to the Lord," making their withholding an act of stealing from God (5:3b). They never actually handed over the whole price, yet all of it belonged to God by virtue of the pledge they made concerning it (cf. Malachi 1:14; Matthew 5:33-37).

- c. Ananias and Sapphira had lied to God, putting Him to the test (5:9). But they had also lied to the watching world. Their actions were contrary to who they claimed to be and their relation to God and those who form His dwelling place. They had borne false witness by representing to men that the Church is simply another natural human institution. *In this way they had effectively undermined Christ's gospel and erected a stumbling block to faith in Him.*

Whatever his specific devices, this is precisely the end game of the archenemy; Peter understood this, and so discerned Satan's infernal fingerprints on Ananias' and Sapphira's deception (5:3). Peter's years with Jesus had taught him well how the adversary operates and what his ultimate goal is. He had witnessed Satan's ongoing efforts to oppose the Son and His messianic mission, culminating with his securing His execution through Judas (John 13:21ff). Indeed Peter had himself been moved by the adversary to try to deter Jesus from the cross. *Satan's power and guile are such that he can lead a man who professes Jesus as the Christ to effectively deny his own profession:* Peter denied his profession of Christ by contradicting the messianic mission (Matthew 16:13-23); Ananias and Sapphira denied theirs by contradicting the core outcome of the messianic mission, namely the formation of the authentic human community of the new creation: the Church as the fullness of Christ and the everlasting sanctuary of the Living God.

Peter had come to the agonizing recognition that Satan will use any tactic to thwart God's design for His creation. If the power of renewal and reconciliation is in the gospel and the faith in Christ that comes through it (Romans 1:16-17, 10:17; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, 15:1-4; Colossians 1:19-23), the adversary will seek at every turn to undermine that gospel, whether by persecution, compromise, or distortion. His most insidious and effective scheme is to color the gospel with the self-righteousness embedded in every human heart (Galatians 1-6; cf. Romans 9:30ff). In the end, Satan is just as pleased with "Christian" affiliation and commitment as he is with false religions, atheism or even high-handed rebellion against God, for all accomplish his singular goal of leading men to miss the kingdom of heaven. As clearly as Jesus Himself, the adversary recognizes that the gate and path leading to life are precisely narrow and easily missed, and so he gladly allows people to embrace even the closest facsimile of the gospel and true faith in Christ so long as they remain distracted from the authentic counterparts.

- d. Satan's involvement points to the nature and gravity of Ananias' and Sapphira's offense, which in turn, explains the severity of God's response. Their deception cost them their lives, not primarily because they had the audacity to lie to the One who is all-knowing and a consuming fire of righteousness, but because of the effect of their lie on the Church and the unbelieving world. Their seemingly insignificant deception misrepresented Christ and His gospel to those who were watching, allowing them to vindicate themselves in their unbelief. But it also set up a stumbling block within the household of faith, providing it with a seductive inducement to misjudgment unto its own practical unbelief. God responded out of jealousy for His Church and its witness, and His response was effective (5:5, 11).