

A Church Seized with Fear

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[0 : 00] Have a seat, friends. You don't have to do much of a big survey to find out that today the Christian denominations and Christian churches have lost nearly all credibility.

I wouldn't say all, but the respect that churches once enjoyed is long gone, and outsiders are very quick to remind Christians of the failure of the church in so many areas, and Christians are right to respond quickly to agree that hurts and wrongs have been performed, and to point out, I guess the defense we use is we say, well, we follow the Lord Jesus, not the church.

We believe in Jesus, not the church, and Jesus is a sinless and perfect saviour, and that is true. But one effect of this being bombarded with this enough is that you end up with people even within the church, Christians, who are jaded and cynical about the people of God as an institution.

And this comes out in many ways within the church. So you may have people in the church who basically love Jesus or want to love Jesus, but are very loosely committed to any church.

They may church up every couple of years, or they may attend irregularly, or if they attend regularly, they won't really get involved because they're either scared of being hurt or they're just cynical about the church.

[1 : 35] So they won't fully give of themselves to the church, even though they want to love and trust Jesus. Some of these people create a kind of clique in the church of the people they like, the people they trust, and the rest they don't bother with, either they don't have the time for or they're worried about being hurt by them or they've been hurt.

And it's very easy to justify this kind of dualism between saying Jesus is the key, not the church. It's a dualism. Part of the historical realism of the book of Acts, of these records of the early church, is that it doesn't take long to get to a story about hypocrisy within the church, a story about division over money.

It fulfills the stereotype that churches are money grubbers. The book of Acts is not a string of success stories. It's realistic.

And the story we have today is of Ananias and Sapphira. Well, it's the kind of story that would only fuel the jaded edge of the Christian cynic toward the church.

And yet, Luke, as he writes the book of Acts, in his wisdom, he presents this story of corruption directly after a record of wonderful Christian community.

[3 : 02] In fact, the story of Ananias and Sapphira and of their deceit is bracketed in the book of Acts of stories about great Christian community and powerful apostolic growth of the community.

And you wonder, how does Luke want us to reconcile these different pictures of positive Christian community and negative corruption and hypocrisy?

How do we reconcile community and corruption in this story and in the church today? I wonder what recipe is Luke giving us for a genuine Christian community?

What does God require of us? And how are we to respond when we find corruption, when we find hypocrisy in the church? How are we to respond when people personally, when hypocrites in the church, hurt us or hurt you and your family?

Well, let's look at the positive side and then let's get to the hypocrisy. It's a wonderful picture. I'm in chapter 4, verse 32. It's a great picture of a unified Christian community.

[4 : 23] They are one of heart and soul and that is expressed in the sharing of physical possessions. It's important that we delineate between the root and the fruit.

They are not gathered for the purpose of sharing stuff. They're not gathered even for the purpose of helping the needy. They are gathered one in heart and soul around worshipping the risen Jesus.

So their unity is spiritual but the fruit is sharing of their possessions. And the way that their unity around Jesus is expressed is by being unified around the group of the apostles.

So with great power, the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all.

The apostles, as we've seen, have a unique role as the eyewitnesses of the death and resurrection and exalted glory of Jesus.

[5 : 26] And so the apostles continue in that testimony. Even though Satan has tried to persecute them, that hasn't worked. They haven't been scared silent.

And the church gathers around this gospel truth that they proclaim. It's a spiritual unity around the common bond of the Lord Jesus, around the gift of his spirit, around his designated apostles.

You can't create Christian unity around anything else other than these things, around the gospel truth, around apostolic preaching, which of course is recorded for us in the New Testament.

The grace of God is on them, fueling their generosity. What a great community. What a wonderful community. Luke goes on to explain what he means about no one claiming private ownership in verse 32.

In verse 34 he explains what that means. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

[6 : 35] They laid it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to each as any had need. This community is living radically different to their society.

They put the physical needs of the rest of the body of Christ above their own financial security. And so I think the picture is, as many have needs, the rest of the body does whatever it takes to provide for those needs.

As many have needs, they would give money. And if there wasn't money, they would sell land. So there was resources to care for the needy in the church.

The assumption seems to be that they, by default, retain their assets. Not everyone's selling up and giving to the apostles. By default, it's their assets, but they love the body of Christ so much that if there is a need, then they will sacrifice their assets to help the body.

And there's a symbolism in not just giving it to the person in need, but they give it to the apostles who have the authority in that church and then they distribute it. So it's as if the whole church is giving to the person, not just individual to individual.

[7 : 56] There's a great challenge for us and great challenge for this church. If you've received the gospel, if the spirit of Christ is in you, if you are one in heart and soul as a body, then you can express that by the sharing of the resources God has given you.

So the kind of questions you could ask are, how generous are you with your brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you help people when you see them in need? How is your church giving going?

Have you reviewed it recently? Are there needs that this church can meet that you could contribute to? Are there needy people that this parish knows, even overseas in the body of Christ, that you could sacrificially share with?

Are you putting your own security tomorrow before the needs of a brother or sister today? It's a wonderful sense of fellowship that you can have when root and fruit are there together, when you've got the same love for Jesus, unity of heart and soul.

You love Jesus with people and you share your possessions with them. There's just a great coming together of root and fruit, a depth of fellowship that I encourage you to seek.

[9 : 16] The gospel transforms lives. And we have an example of that in this man Barnabas, or he was originally Joseph. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas, which means son of encouragement.

He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Barnabas was a model Christian. He was a converted Levite priest.

And the symbolism of what he does is quite stunning. He's very, very humble, because in the old covenant system, he had a position of prestige. He was a Levite.

He was a priest. And now he had elevated honor, but now we see him as a Christian, not claiming any of that honor, turning it aside, deferring to Jesus' chosen apostles and giving to the work of the church.

Now Ananias and Sapphira are watching, and they misread the whole thing, because what they see is a man get great glory. They see Barnabas looks good.

[10 : 31] Look at him. Everyone's praising him, and he's given money. Everyone was watching. They totally misunderstand the humility that Barnabas is showing in deferring to the apostles. I

mean, you can't help but wonder if Jesus' teaching should have been heeded when he says, let your giving be done in secret.

Don't let your right hand know what your left is doing. Maybe they're not following that rightly enough, but that's what they did. And so Ananias and Sapphira get an idea in their head, a bad idea, an evil idea.

They sold a piece of property. Ananias, with the consent of his wife, sold the property. With his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet.

And the idea, I think, is that they're imitating what Barnabas did and giving the impression that they're doing a Barnabas, that they've sold an entire piece of land and they're bringing all the proceeds, as Barnabas did, and putting it at their feet and saying, look at us, you know.

So often hypocrisy works in tandem. People conspire together to do things together. And their motivation is obviously their self-glory.

[11:50] They want the acclaim of doing this great deed. And Peter, convicted by the Holy Spirit, brings a word of judgment.

And now the story really turns very, very sour. Ananias, Peter asked, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?

While it remained unsold, did not remain your own. And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you've contrived this deed in your heart?

You did not lie to us, but to God. Peter recognises that Satan is at work in the Christian church.

Satan has been at work from without, trying to bring pressure on the apostles.

And that hasn't worked yet. So now Satan works from within to bring corruption within the church.

And clearly Ananias is not, I don't think, a genuine Christian believer because he's not one in heart and soul with the rest of the body.

[13:02] His heart is filled with this conspiracy for his own glory. Maybe Ananias was drawn into the church because of the great crowds, maybe because of the miracles, maybe because of the warm community.

In times of revival, at any time really, it's the unregenerate slip into the people of God. We should expect it. The wheat and the weeds are together until the day of Jesus.

And Peter makes it very clear. He doesn't say, why haven't you given all your money? You owe the church all your money. He's not saying that. He's saying, it's your money. You can do what you want with it.

Why did you try and deceive us and give us the impression that you were giving us all the proceeds of the land? And you weren't lying to us. You weren't lying to the church.

You were lying to the Holy Spirit who is God. You were lying to God. And when Ananias heard these words, powerful words, he fell down and died.

[14:03] And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him. Similar to the day of Pentecost where Jesus gives evidence that he is Lord, Jesus is giving evidence that he is judge.

Jesus is showing that he is raised and the issue of hypocrisy is a serious one among this new community of believers. Public hypocrisy will not be tolerated by God because it's a lying to the Holy Spirit who dwells among the people.

It's a lying to the Lord Jesus who reigns. This is a new age, Jesus is saying, and this kind of hypocrisy will not be tolerated.

Now, Sapphira, the wife, is at home and she's probably just so anxious because she's waiting to hear this report about how great she is and she's waiting for Ananias to come and say, come here, everyone wants to thank you and she's waiting with glee and her husband doesn't come home and so she goes to find out, where's my husband?

What's happened? And presumably, the church is so dumbstruck, they're so filled and seized with fear, they see her, they just don't know what to say to her.

[15:30] You know, on the one hand, if she's innocent, she's going to be a grieving widow. On the other hand, worse things are in store for her. So after an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

In verse 8, Peter says to her, tell me, tell me. Now this is an act of grace. This is Peter giving Sapphira a chance to repent, you know, a chance to come clean.

Tell me. Whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price. And she said, yes, that was the price.

Foolish woman, she too tests the spirit of the Lord Jesus. Peter says to her, how is it that you have agreed together to put the spirit of the Lord to the test?

Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door and they will carry you out. Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. The young men came in and found her dead.

[16:39] So they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things. don't test the spirit of Jesus.

Peter says. The young men, they just know that it's a sadness that they think, foolish woman, you should have come clean. And they bury her with her husband.

The lesson is, I think the principle is, the church is not a club for looking good. We're not playing games when we come to church together.

We're gathered around in the name of Jesus and he's the judge. I think Jesus, this isn't his normal way of exercising judgment. I think his normal way is his thawing up his anger till the day.

But he wanted to make the point, early in the church's history, that the arrival of the spirit means the stakes are high and the people of God matter.

[17:41] The fear that the early church had, I think, is a fear that we ought to have today, that we ought to seek to have because the Holy Spirit has come. The Holy Spirit is among us.

The Holy Spirit is not a feel-good thing. It's a fear thing. Jesus is Lord. We ought to have a reverential worship are trembling before the Lord Jesus as we gather together and whenever we speak to one another and whenever we go out as Christians in his name in the world.

Now I'm sad to say in the book of Acts, this thing about playing games to self-glory happens again and again and again. So later in chapter 8, there's a pagan mage by the name of Simon who kind of joins the church and he wants to buy apostolic power and he gets in big trouble.

He's there for his own glory. There's a false prophet called Elimas in chapter 13 who loves the glory he gets for being a so-called prophet and he doesn't like Paul because Paul gets more attention.

He tries to outplay Paul and Paul blinds him in the power of the spirit. In chapter 15 of Acts, you've got the Judaizers who are a group within the church who try and make the ritual of circumcision something they can use to prop themselves up over the Gentile converts.

[19:11] Again, it's a game for self-glory. In chapter 19, you've got the sons of Sceva who try and use the name of Jesus to play games, to play with demons and they get a beating for it.

This issue of people in the church doing it for their own glory is common in Acts and it's common today. Whenever we put on a pretense for being holier than we are, whenever we gossip to cut someone down, to prop ourselves up therefore, we are playing the same game.

Whenever we go on committees not to serve but to simply ruffle and strut our feathers, it's the same game. Sometimes people do it by asking innocent questions which are pregnant with self-justification.

Sometimes people make self-righteous complaints to the leaders of a church about the minutia of a service in the name of worship and order.

When you do your good works and you're looking over your shoulder thinking, who's watching me? Well, you may be involved in a ministry and all you're concerned about is how it makes you look rather than serving the Lord Jesus.

[20:32] The message is don't make a pretense to be holier than you are, to a holiness that is non-existent. When you try and deceive the church or play games for your own glory, you're not just lying to the church, you're lying to God, you're lying to Jesus, you're lying to the Holy Spirit, you're lying to the whole Trinity.

Just imagine if Ananias was laid dead through the word of the apostle Peter, how much more will someone who spends a lifetime showing off in the church playing games, how will they stand up against the voice of God at the sound of the trumpet on the day of judgment.

For all of us, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

The Jesus who sits at God's right hand will judge us on the last day. In the meantime, we ought to fear him and treat his spirit-filled people, the church, I think, with the honor they deserve, not because of their own righteousness but because God's spirit dwells in them.

I think the event of Ananias and Sapphira is a kind of a spiritual mirror of the day of judgment. If we are not here today and part of this church and its activities to serve and worship Jesus, if we are here just to play games, then eternal fire awaits.

[22 : 25] Being struck dead is kind of nothing in comparison with the judgment to come. Elsewhere in Acts, Peter will say, God has commanded us to testify that Jesus is the one ordained by God as the judge of the living and the dead.

That's the gospel of Acts. Paul in Acts says, God has fixed a day when he will judge the world with righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and he's given proof of this by raising him from the dead.

That is, Jesus is the man appointed to judge. This is a church seized with fear, and I think this fear would be good for us today, not least because it would bridle our selfish ambition, but also I think, and I think this is Luke's main point, this is his main point in putting the shocking judgment of Ananias and Sapphira in between two stories about community.

Luke is saying the fear of God is an essential ingredient of true Christian community. The fear of God is an essential ingredient of true Christian community.

This is the first time in verse 14 that Luke has used the word church. It's the first time he's mentioned us as a group, as an ecclesia, as an assembly, and we are a church, the whole church is seized by great fear.

[23 : 58] So the church is to be characterized by fear. That's a good thing, that we have a reverential, trusting, trembling worship of Jesus.

Of course, not just in our gatherings, but in all of our life. Now I think some mistakes we make here are we misunderstand what it means to be reverent.

So we say quietness is reverence, or we say outward appearance is reverence, dressing up nice is reverence. We say formality is reverence, but that can't be right.

I mean, that basically is leading into the trap that Ananias and Sapphira fell into, saying that we can measure reverence by our outward show. That's Ananias and Sapphira's gain.

If we read Acts carefully, we see that reverence is fear of Jesus. Fear of Jesus. You get the impression of the early church.

[25 : 01] I've said this before, I want to say it again. There's not a sense that they are a nice, quiet, formal society. They are a crowded, chaotic group, eating together, sharing together.

There is danger. There are threats. There's lots going on in this early church, and they are seized with fear because the spirit of Jesus is among them. And where there is a worshipful fear of Jesus, there you have true Christian community.

I mean, just think about it. Think about it. If you were thinking about giving some money to the church, like Barnabas, and you've seen what happened to Ananias and Sapphira, if you're a Christian, that would show you that giving of your money to the church is a great and important thing that Jesus takes very seriously.

I don't think it would discourage giving. I think it would encourage humble, solemn sharing of possessions. I don't think the judgment death of Ananias and Sapphira would hinder the warmth of this Christian community.

I think it would solidify them in heart and soul as people who serve and worship the Lord Jesus. This event didn't disperse the church.

[26 : 19] It gathered them. It gave them a sense of honor and privilege that this is full on. What they are doing following Jesus is a full on thing to do. This event, this fear of the Lord Jesus was to glue them together as a Christian community.

Friends, what else do you think? What is the spiritual root of Christian charity and love? Think of Paul in Romans 12.

He says, Beloved, never avenge yourselves. And there's a whole chapter about how we treat each other. Why shouldn't we avenge us? If someone hurts me in the church, why shouldn't I avenge myself?

The answer Paul gives, it's not because the spirit makes us patient. It's not because God's love makes us feel warm and we don't feel hurt. The answer Paul says is, Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God.

For it is written, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. The church sees with fear has the power to be a patient, forgiving community because they know the judge will do his job.

[27 : 37] The sense that the Lord Jesus sits on the throne ought to change the way we treat each other, that I won't speak harshly to this person because the spirit of Jesus dwells in them.

John Calvin, the great reformer, put it so well. He said, and if you're a complacent Christian or you've already got it against other people in this room, Calvin says this well, he says, Believers never fear God so perfectly that they do not benefit still further by being warned by his judgments. That is, you can't get enough of having the sense that God is judge. The doctrine of judgment is a great basis for Christian community, and that fear is the godly fear that fell upon the early church. Friends, let's take seriously who we are as Jesus' spirit-filled people. He is watching carefully the games we play, the way we treat each other, the way we talk to each other, the way we humbly serve or the way we puff ourselves up.

Let us draw on him now. He's there, he's watching us, he's God's right hand, let us draw on him now for mercy, and let us stop the charades that we play and the games that we play.

[29 : 02] Lord Jesus, we come before your throne for mercy now, while we are still having the opportunity. We thank you, Lord Jesus, that you are the judge, and in your wisdom you have chosen to not separate the wheat from the weeds at this time, but a day is coming when you will.

Help us in the meantime, Lord, to worshipfully fear your name, help us to tremble before you and before your word, help us to honour your people, and to stick closely to those among whom your spirit dwells.

God, help us to not be jaded or cynical toward this body, help us to show forgiveness to each other, not least because you have forgiven us, but also because it is your place to judge, it is your place to avenge, and may we be one in heart and soul, Lord God, here at Holy Trinity.

May we, Lord Jesus, make us one in heart and soul, in gospel truth, and help us to express that in the service of each other and in the sharing of possessions.

Amen.