

Trouble Within (Or, Community Sucks)

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

I know that you are, but love these pictures of the early church, especially as we are in those early days ourselves.

Acts chapter 4. Acts chapter 4. I'm going to begin reading in verse 32, so if you look there with me. Acts chapter 4, verse 32. Many as were owners of land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet.

And it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a Navite, a native of Cyprus, sold the field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the feet of the apostles.

[1 : 50] Chapter 5. But a man named Ananias with his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property. 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.

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?

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 lied, not lied to man, but to God. When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last.

And great fear came upon all who heard of it. The young man arose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. After an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

[3 : 00] Peter said to her, Tell me whether you sold the land for so much. She said, Yes, for so much. 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. 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. And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

That is the word of God, the only authoritative word you will hear this morning. Chapel Hill Church, a large Bible-believing church, invited an evangelist in for a week of special messages.

At the end of the week, the evangelist challenged the congregation to develop a deeper devotion to Christ and be more committed to evangelism. Then, without any showiness or endless appeals, he invited people to come forward in the auditorium and to kneel down with him in prayer.

[4 : 26] His messages had touched people's hearts, and they responded to his invitation. But this church was not accustomed to altar calls.

We probably are familiar, but they were not accustomed to altar calls. And at the end of the meeting, when this prominent church member expressed to all within earshot what he thought about the altar call, his loud, angry words and facial expressions shocked those around him.

He accused the evangelist of unbiblical practices and emotional manipulation. He even threatened to leave the church if the leadership did not address this situation quickly.

Upon hearing the angry man's words, some people jumped in to defend the evangelist. They said God had used this man this week. He was a great man. They accused those who opposed the altar calls as being old and straight-laced and too traditional and insensitive to the Holy Spirit.

Other people, though, they sided with the angry man's accusations, claiming that the evangelist was preaching a gospel that was just easy believism.

[5 : 39] I don't know if you've ever heard that phrase, but just kind of an easy, simple gospel. They slandered the evangelist. They called him a liberal. They attacked the church leaders.

And soon gossip and rumors had spread. Past grievances against one another were rekindled, and harmful accusations flew in every direction.

Anger, misinformation, fear, suspicion, and distrust. Friends and families were encouraged to pick a side and take a stand.

And within a year, Chapel Hill Church split into two congregations. Each group claimed they were in the right and had no interest in reconciling with one another.

Now, I don't know what you think about altar calls. I'm not about to have that debate this morning.

But this story tells us something that's all too common and all too familiar.

[6 : 43] Whether we have been in the midst of a church conflict ourselves or just heard about what's going on across town, we know it too well. Far too often, the people that are supposed to be known for love are known for how they bite and devour one another.

But it begs the question, what do we do when trouble comes to the church? I mean, this is a happy day for us. It's kind of an odd passage that we land in this morning.

This is a happy day for us one year. But what happens when trouble comes? Because trouble's coming. How do we handle disagreement and conflict?

How do we respond when the good times aren't rolling? How do we not let the small things continue to spin out and finger-pointing, name-calling, and side-taking until a whole congregation is split?

How do we not let a little root of bitterness begin to grow? This morning, we're going to dive into a very well-known passage.

[7 : 51] This morning, we're going to dive into really a passage that's just church in the real world.

And it's not all kumbaya. If there was any idea in these first four chapters of Acts that the early church was just ideal and everybody got along perfectly, this passage corrects that misnomer.

And yet, this passage warns us and woos us to what God is building. God is with us, and he is exhorting us and giving us an undefeatable hope in the church he's building.

Where we're going and where I want to go is don't play fast and loose with unity the Spirit creates. Don't play fast and loose with unity the Spirit creates.

I'm going to break this out in three points. First one is community rocks. Point one, community rocks. Days like these or days like today or days where we're aware that community rocks.

Community rocks when other people are others-centered, when everybody's others-centered. And the Spirit creates a radical others-centered community. That's what we see in this passage.

[9 : 02] Similar to Acts 2, if you remember that, we studied that a couple weeks ago. The Spirit fell at Pentecost, and then they just broke out in this radical others-focused community. The Spirit had fallen on them, and it affected their relationship and their friendships.

And the same thing happens here. Remember last week, we studied about the Spirit falling on the house and shaking the house. Well, the immediate fruit is in their relationships. Often, the Spirit's presence is more evident in how fast we drop everything to help, and how often we break a budget to give than in our prayers and tears and sighs and spiritual gifts.

And community rocks in those moments. I was helping Buddy move yesterday. Buddy and Judy move yesterday. And community rocks in those moments. But let's look closer at these verses to see why.

Verse 32 says, Now the full number of those who believe were of one heart and one soul. Marriage is one flesh. But the community that God creates is of one soul.

Acts 2, 42 says, They devoted themselves to fellowship. The idea is that fellowship means to share. It means to give and to take because of what you share together. The idea underneath fellowship and underneath the community that God creates is because of salvation, we share Christ.

[10 : 29] We share that which is of highest value. D.A. Carson says it like this. The church is not made up of natural friends.

It is made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not a common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything of that sort.

Christians come together because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ and owe him a common allegiance. I believe that with all my heart.

That's what goes on. When a church is really filled with the Spirit, it's filled with the Spirit and it's united around Jesus Christ. That's the commonality. There's a new bloodline that runs to the church of Jesus Christ.

It's the bloodline of Jesus Christ. But look what it says. Look at the effect. It says in verse 32 again, it says, They're all of one heart and one soul. And then at the end of that verse, it says they had everything in common.

[11 : 40] They have Christ in common. And then they have everything else in common. That word common comes from the same word for fellowship. The idea is because we have Christ in common, we share everything else.

Because we share Christ, we share everything else. We count all that we own as common. I love the way it's said in the middle of those two phrases I just pulled out.

It says, No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own. I just love how simple that it is. No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own.

That's so simple, right? And incredible. Incredible. Christ came. It was a massive upheaval in their hearts.

Nothing that our culture says, hold on to. Whatever it is. 401k, money, house, things like that. None of those things they said were their own.

[12 : 47] The idea is not that when push comes to shove, we share like a couple young kids. When there's a special offering, when the need's greater, when someone really asks. The idea is we're gathered together around Jesus Christ and we're on a lookout for how to help one another.

We're eager to own one another's things. We're eager to, you know, we view our money and possessions as just slush funds ready to be spent. Because we don't count it our own.

Because we share Christ, we're eager to own the needs of others. Now, it has nothing to do with the message. Well, maybe it'll tie in in a second.

But I'm a UT fan. My kids are UT fans. It's not a choice. Until last night, I thought it was an affliction. But I feel like good times are around the corner.

But, you know, earlier this season, I couldn't help but love the story of the fourth grade kid that the news kind of called a hold of. He was supposed to wear a shirt for College Colors Day.

[13 : 53] You probably read this story. He didn't have a UT shirt. I think he's too poor to buy one. So he made one, wore it to class, and he was mocked and bullied. And his teacher snapped a picture of this T-shirt.

Now, of course, all these bullies and this incident happened in Florida, which tells us all we need to know. But this picture went viral.

And Vol Nation took action. Now, we ousted a coach two years ago. So Vol Nation took action. Within days, the boy received a box full of Tennessee garb.

Then he was extended a full scholarship beginning in the fall of 2028. And then the cherry on top. Tennessee even took his design, made it into a T-shirt to sell on campus, of which I'm sure he gets no proceeds.

But the NCAA is battling that out right now. But I think the church is meant to be like that. We have a common allegiance, and therefore we got each other's back.

[15 : 07] Instead of biting and devouring one another, we're the people that protect one another, fight for one another, sacrifice for one another.

We take pride. I think that's what's going on down here. We take pride in providing for one another. Look at verse 34. It says, There was not a needy person among them. They took pride in this.

There's not a need they know of. My God, that should be our goal. And so the first picture we have at the end of these verses is Barnabas.

He's the one who did it right. So many ways. He took the field. He sold it. He gave the money to the apostles. He wasn't commanded or coerced or any of these things. He didn't need to sell it.

But when the need arose, he didn't count it to his own anymore, and so he gladly took what was his, sold it, and shared it with everyone to help. And community like that is breathtaking.

[16 : 04] It's marked by otherworldly humility and other-centeredness. It's beautiful. It rocks. But community does not always rock.

Point two is community sucks. Community sucks. Now, my mom does not allow me to say that word, so I'll probably try to keep it to a minimum because she will listen.

Ed Welch says it, I think, so well when he says, Relationships are where we find the best and the worst of life. I think that is so true.

I mean, relationships are what makes life great, and they are what makes life suck sometimes.

Community is the best when others are other-centered, and community is the worst.

It's the worst when others aren't. Sin and Satan tear apart community that God unites. Sin and Satan tear apart what the Spirit creates, and Luke is a realist.

[17 : 11] He helps us with these verses. He helps us by giving us this picture of Ananias and Sapphira. Now, Ananias and Sapphira are like Bonnie and Clyde. Their reputation precedes them.

And you know this story. There's so much going on. You can preach a whole message from this part of it, but I can't do that today. I want to unpack a couple things. First, Satan fills their hearts. You know, the community is filled with the Spirit. That's the overarching emphasis of this passage, and it's rocking when people are led by the Spirit, but Satan fills their hearts. Look down there in verse 3.

Peter says to Ananias, Why has Satan filled your heart? Now, what's that mean? Does that mean Ananias and Sapphira were kind of taken over by a demon or literally possessed by Satan?

I don't think so. I think it's a way of saying that the community is at war. Community is at war.

[18 : 12] Some folks see a devil behind every bush. Most live as if the devil doesn't exist. I think the usual suspects said it really well, and it said the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he doesn't exist.

But the Bible doesn't speak that way. Again and again, it reminds us that spiritual warfare is a daily reality. It says we don't wrestle against flesh and blood, but we wrestle against the rulers and authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, and the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places, and the ringleader of it all is Satan himself.

He is an accuser and tempter and deceiver. He does not so much take over our hearts as he slowly and subtly entices us with untruths and half-truths until we stray far away from the truth.

Jesus said it very well, as he often does, and John 8 with these words. He said, why do you not understand what I say? Remember, he's talking to the Pharisees and scribes.

It's because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father's desire.

[19 : 27] He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Jesus is not saying that you're just suddenly overtaken by Satan, the idea, and therefore a son of Satan in that sense. He's saying you've been enticed, you've been led by his lies such that you cannot hear any longer.

I'm preaching the message of the gospel, which we know so wonderfully from John 8, and yet you can't hear because of these things. Satan is trying to spread his influence.

That's what's going on. Satan is a father of lies, and he wants more children. David Powelson says it well when he says, spiritual warfare is a battle for lordship.

At its core, it is a battle for who you will serve. Will you resemble the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, or will you grow more and more like Satan, the liar and destroyer?

[20 : 35] This is a battle that encompasses all of life. Satan is intentionally evil, and he's up to no good. He has desires he wants us to follow.

He is a father. He raises children. He disciplines his children in evil. Bob Dylan said it best. You've got to serve someone, and Satan's trying to win people over to his side.

That's what's going on in this passage. Just as the serpent slithered into the garden and enticed Adam and Eve away, so too he's trying to sneak into the community and sprinkle pretense and hypocrisy into the unity God has created.

So Satan fills their heart. They agree to lie. Now, if you talk to any married couple, one of the greatest challenges of marriage is communication. They realize they don't communicate the same way.

Guys want to fix things. Girls want you to listen. Guys want cliff notes. Girls want details. Guys want to talk about superficial things, sports, stuff like that.

[21 : 41] Girls want to know our hearts. But when we look at Ananias and Sapphira, they have no communication problems. They are talking quite well and are perfectly aligned.

Look at verse 1 of chapter 5. He said, But a man named Ananias with his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself. So they talked about it and agreed to something. Kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Satan tempts them. Satan sows doubt. Wouldn't it be better if we kept back some of this money? You never know what might come down the pike. What if the car dies? What if the HVAC breaks? Break Satan is always trying to make us uneasy about living selflessly for Christ. But don't draw the wrong conclusion here so that there is this deliberation going on there.

But it would have been completely okay if they didn't sell their possessions. It would have been okay if they just gave a part of it.

[22 : 45] But they didn't want to. They wanted the credit of it all. That's what's going on. This is not communism or something like that. They talk. They agree. And they lie.

Satan tempts. They choose to lie. And then the Lord executes them. Look in verse 5. When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last.

Verse 10. Immediately she fell down. Sapphira. At his feet and breathed her last. She falls at the feet of him whom she should have brought the full sum of money.

The Lord executes them. Peter names the sin. Why did you lie? Why are you testing the spirit? And they drop dead. Now it's very clear, I think, from the context that they didn't have a heart attack or some sort of medical emergency.

The simple wording and response of fear indicate that this is a rare moment in which the Lord brings immediate judgment for sin and instant death.

[23 : 53] God promised in the garden, all who eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil shall surely die. That's not a spiritual death or a metaphorical death. The wages of sin is death.

And here there is no delay. Often the Lord delays. There's no delay in this passage. They sin. The Lord holds them immediately accountable and brings immediate judgment. But what are we to do with this passage, right?

This is the type of passage people say, I'm done with Christianity. What kind of God would execute for a little lie?

Shouldn't he just have waited? Maybe they would have humbled themselves. Maybe he could have come around them and said, don't do that. I thought the angry God was the God of the Old Testament. What's this doing here? You know, I think this story confronts us and offends us because we've strayed so far from reverence for God and humility before him.

In a recent book, David Brooks tells the story of driving home from work and listening to the radio. He's listening to a broadcast from August 15, 1945.

[25 : 14] It was the day after VJ Day. You've probably heard a little bit more about VE Day. That's Victory in Europe Day. VJ Day is Victory in Japan Day.

The day the Allies secured victory in the Pacific Theater. Japan was a brutal part of that war.

The broadcast included many well-known celebrities of the day. So these celebrities come on and they're talking about it and they're humbly expressing gratefulness that the war is over. Bing Crosby is on there.

He says, well, this is on the radio broadcast. It looks like this is it. What can we say at a time like this? Celebrate.

All anyone can do is thank God it's over. He continues and concludes later on. Today is our deep down feeling of humility.

[26 : 16] The whole nation seemed to agree. There were celebrations, right? There were pictures from Times Square of people kissing in Times Square, confetti falling.

But the joy was marked by humility. There was no, this is one of the greatest victories in American military history. One of the strongest and the most ruthless foes.

But no one went around saying how great they were. No one announced that they were better than anyone else. No one printed out some bumper stickers telling of their awesomeness.

They were all humbled that the war was over. He continues telling the stories that I arrived home before the program was over and continued listening in my driveway. Then, he says, I went inside, turned on a football game.

A quarterback threw a short pass to a wide receiver who was tackled almost immediately for a two-yard gain. The defense did what all professional athletes do these days in moments of personal accomplishment.

[27 : 19] He did a victory dance. Now listen. It occurred to me that I had just watched more self-celebration after a two-yard gain than I had heard after the United States had won World War II.

He continues and says, Our culture has shifted from a culture of humility to a culture of promotion and pride. From a culture that says, I'm no better than anyone else to one that says, look at me. Look at what I did. I think this passage troubles us. It does trouble us in so many ways. But I think one of the reasons it troubles us is because the essence of evil to us and to our culture is not what offends the glory and honor of God.

The essence of evil to us and to our culture is failing to notice how special and important we are. And this passage is meant to silence us.

It's a holy ground passage. We're meant to kind of take our shoes off. You know, our inner attorney is quick to come out in a passage like this. It's not right. It's not fair.

[28 : 24] But there's something else going on here. This is a revelation of God and his holiness. R.C. Sproul says it well.

He says, Somewhere deep inside in the secret chambers of our hearts, we harbor the notion that God owes us his mercy. As soon as we think God owes us mercy, we're not thinking about mercy anymore.

You get the point? God doesn't owe Ananias and Sapphira anything. He gave them everything. He gave them life. He gave them breath. He made the rain fall.

He fed them. He satisfied their hearts. He satisfied them with so many good things. And when they keep the money back, they're not making a little lie and a little thing. And they're not fudging on the details.

They're rebelling against God. It's the creature saying to the creator, I will rule myself. Our sins are many and his mercy is not owed.

[29 : 24] We're guilty. We're guilty. This passage is meant to make us silent. You can't be a Christian if you haven't been made silent. That's what Romans 3.19 would say.

There's so much talk in our culture. But all humankind, all the boasters and the talkers will gather before the only throne that matters. And they will all be silent before him.

The only ones who are rescued are the ones who are silent now. The gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to be silent now because our sins are many and our guilt was laid upon the precious son of God who was crushed in our place.

So that by his wounds we might be healed. This passage is a warning, but it's also a door of hope. It's saying if you'll be silent before me, you can avoid the furious wrath that you deserve.

But this passage is also meant to sober us up. The community is a precious thing. It's a precious thing.

[30 : 36] Don't bring your self-interest in here. Churches aren't split over big things. They're split over little things.

Self-interest takes so many forms. It is striking to me that the bottom of this is a desire for approval. The desire to be thought well of. Self-interest, fear of man, the love of approval will cost you your life.

It's not a silly sin of embarrassment. It costs you your life. Pretense, duplicity, and hypocrisy abound in the church.

Let's don't do it. It's a sin. Community sucks when self-interest is. It's in my heart. I'm not trying to stand up here like I got this stuff figured out.

It's in my heart. I'm fighting it. I want this community to be protected. Point three, but through it all, the spirit continues to reign and work.

[31 : 48] The spirit preserves the church. I've said that in so many different ways. You remember the great power, great grace that we saw in verse 33? That's the spirit of God.

And immediately in chapter 5, verse 12, the signs and wonders return. The idea is that sometimes community rocks. Sometimes it sucks. But the community is upheld by the spirit of God who works in it.

That's the miracle. The spirit will not be stopped by trouble without and trouble within. Bring on the foes from without and bring on the wolves from within.

The spirit of God is greater. That's what's going on. And strikingly, this passage continues. Look down there in verse 11 with the very first reference to church and all of Acts. He says, great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard these things.

This word ekklesia is the main word translated church in the New Testament. And it refers to an assembly, a gathering of people. And Luke uses it very intentionally here to say, to look back to all that God did when he led his people out of Egypt into the promised land.

[32 : 57] And before him to worship him, to be a gathered people. It also looks forward to that final gathering where everybody from every person from tribe, tongue, people, and nation that is redeemed through Jesus Christ will gather to worship him.

But it also transforms the way we look right now. The church is God's gathered people. It's not my church. It's not your church. It's God's church.

It's God's church. You know, over the past several years, my wife and I have, when we've traveled and we've tried to travel some, when we've traveled, we've begun using Airbnb.

I know you probably know this or at least heard of it. You know, Airbnb is totally genius. You know, when you go to stay somewhere, you don't want to stay at a hotel room that's cold and sterile and doesn't have the conveniences of your daily life and conveniences of your home.

And so, you want to do Airbnb so you have all those conveniences at your fingertips. And though we have stayed in these things, in different Airbnbs all over the place, there's something I just can't get used to.

[34 : 04] Especially the ones where they are somebody's home and they just moved out for the weekend or something like that. It feels a little odd to sleep in someone's bed. You know, I just can't get around that, you know.

It's just creepy, you know. Or to sit on someone's couch. I mean, you're like, I won't describe what you're wearing, but you're sitting on the couch watching a show or something like that.

Or maybe you're eating at their table. You're drinking coffee on their porch or whatever. You know, it's creepy. But it also makes me want to be careful. It's almost like they're looking in, you know, like Big Brother.

They're looking in. I'm trying to make sure the coffee goes back in the right place and get all those grounds up or something like that. I want to treat the house right. Right. I think this passage is just saying the same thing to us.

Let's treat the house right. Let's treat the church right. It isn't ours. We ought not pay fast and lose.

[35 : 07] We don't get to treat it however we want. We don't want to use her. We must not use her and divide her. We must not slander her and gossip about her. We must protect her and defend her.

We must hold her up when she's weary. Remember Joshua and Caleb, I guess, raised Moses' hands. There's days where we've got to hold the church up.

We want to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. We want to walk with fear. I think that's the main takeaway. They're overcome with fear.

Not that God's going to lash out and take them out or something like that. But fear that we're careful and conscientious and aware that we'll give an account for how we treat the church and how we care for her.

Don't play fast and lose with unity the Spirit creates. D.A. Young, I'll conclude with this, encourages us very simply.

[36 : 13] Find a good church. Get involved. Become a member. Stay there for the long haul. Put away thoughts of revolution for a while and join the plodding visionaries.

Now that is a wonderful phrase. Go to church this Sunday. Worship there in spirit and truth. Be patient with your leaders. Rejoice when the gospel is faithfully proclaimed.

Bear with those who hurt you and give people the benefit of the doubt. And when you're there, sing like you mean it. Say hi to the teenager no one notices. Welcome the blue hairs and the nose ring.

Volunteer for the nursery once in a while. And yes, bring your fried chicken to the potluck like everyone else. Fight a friend to church. Take the new couple out for coffee.

Enjoy the Sundays that click for you. Pray extra hard on the Sundays that don't. And don't despise the day of small beginning. God's building a church.

[37 : 21] Jesus began a church. And said the gates of hell won't prevail against it.

Let us spend our lives to protect her. Father in heaven, we thank you for these minutes. We thank you for your words.

We thank you for how realistic and helpful they are. Lord, we pray, I pray, that you would rivet us with this desire to give our lives for the church you bought with your own blood.

We thank you. Lord, I thank you for so much grace in this room that I could spend afternoon thanking you for. And how you've united us together. And I pray, God, that you would sustain us. We're so thankful that we are not upheld by our willpower and our strength. But by the Spirit who promises to will and to work and to move among us.

[38 : 28] And to uphold us until the day we see you face to face. And are finally gathered in worship before your throne. Uphold us, we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com.