

Confrontation, Part II

Acts 5:12-42



Read Acts 5:1-42 in preparation for the discussion notes below.

According to Acts 5:12-16, the Apostles continue to perform miraculous signs and wonders, and to heal many from Jerusalem and the surrounding towns. They continue to meet in Solomon's Colonnade at the temple and yet no one else dared to join them even though they were highly regarded. Why didn't others join? Their healings and teachings continue to draw people, but yet we do not hear that the number of disciples increases. The number of believers increases, but not disciples. (Remember believers and disciples are not the same thing. A disciple is one who commits himself to following in the footsteps of his teacher, utterly committing himself to the ministry of Christ.) So if the Holy Spirit is moving in the ministry (and is so attested by the miraculous signs and healings), then why is the number of disciples not increasing? There are a few potential reasons that we will look into in the course of our study today. We will be taking a close look at two passages, Acts 5:1-11 and Joshua 7:1-26 which will hopefully shed some light on this puzzling question.

Acts 5:1-11 tells the bizarre story of Ananias and Sapphira. This couple, committed to the newly formed church, sell a piece of property with the public (within the circle of the disciples) intention of giving the profits to the church. Secretly they plan to hold back a portion of the proceeds for themselves. Upon first reading this doesn't seem such a terrible offense as to bring a judgment of death from the Lord. What the NIV and NAB don't translate well is that the Greek verb *noshizomai* translated in this verse as "*kept for oneself*" (v.3, NIV) carries a stronger meaning: to embezzle¹. One does not embezzle from one's own money, but from someone else's. At this point it appears that the property had already been given over or pledged to the Christian community. Ananias with his wife's full knowledge conspired to keep what was pledged to God. They did not view God reverently, or perhaps they underestimated His view of deliberate sin. Either way, the penalty was to be completely cut off from the community. This may seem a harsh judgment in our eyes, but we do not have the luxury of knowing all the details of this situation, nor do we possess the Lord's discernment in knowing the intentions and motivations of the heart. The Lord is just in all his judgments. Their disobedience left unaddressed may have led the small community into further sin. The example set by this couple would lead others astray. Their sin was dealt with quickly and decisively by a just and merciful God.

Interestingly there is a parallel story in Joshua 7:1-26 where the same Greek word appears (*noshizomai*, meaning "to embezzle"). A man named Achan received the same death penalty for taking booty from Jericho that had been set aside for God. Achan didn't take God's command seriously and he vastly underestimated God's tolerance for deliberate sin. In Joshua 6:18 the Lord commanded him: "*But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it.* (Josh 6:18). It may have seemed a small thing to Achan, but the consequences of his sin reverberated

¹ Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

across the entire nation, and most especially his family. Like Achan, our choices and actions affect more people than just ourselves. It is a temptation to rationalize our sins (and thereby they become deliberate sin) by saying they are too small or affect only me when in truth they affect everyone around you.

Israelites died in battle at Ai (Joshua 7:3-5) because of Achan's sin. Now he was to be completely cut off from Israel. The penalty for Achan's sin was enormous. Why did Achan's entire family pay for his sin? The Bible doesn't tell us all the details of this event. Possibly family members participated in this crime. In the ancient world, the family was treated as a whole. Achan, the head of his family, was something like a tribal leader. He was the role model for the family. The attitude of his actions taught those under his influence that disobedience to God's command (deliberate sin) was inconsequential and acceptable behavior. Achan's entire family was to be stoned along with him so that no trace of the sin would remain in Israel. In our tolerant and modern culture that emphasizes individual responsibility, we have a hard time understanding such a sweeping decree. In ancient cultures it was a common punishment. God's punishment was just: Achan had disobeyed God's command to destroy everything in Jericho, and place all the gold and silver into the Lord's treasury (6:24); thus everything that belonged to Achan had to be destroyed. God deals definitively with sin, and in complete justice. If his judgment seems harsh to us, it is because we don't know all the details that led to this judgment. We must take on faith that God's judgment for blatant disobedience is just. His immediate action also points to the fact that the sins of Achan required swift judgment before his actions led others astray.

Both Achan's actions and those of Ananias and Sapphira are not only blatant disobedience and deliberate sin, but they stole what was set aside for God. In embezzling from God, they usurped his position as sovereign. They believed they knew better than God. And their sin would lead others into disobedience if not dealt with swiftly. In the case of Ananias and Sapphira we do see they recognize their own guilt; but we do not see repentance or a request for forgiveness. We see hypocrisy, pride, greed and dishonesty as a result of not living up to their commitment to the Church and the Holy Spirit. We don't know why they received a penalty of death for their actions, but they did. For whatever reason, the judgment of God was death – we have to accept it on the grounds of lack of detailed information.

Returning to our passage in Acts 5:13 it says, "*No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.*" We don't know why new *disciples* weren't coming to the temple for instruction, but likely fear stemming from making a public commitment. The story of Ananias and Sapphira certainly spread among the believers throughout Jerusalem. It is a fearful story illustrating the cost of following Christ obediently and honestly. It is also very likely that people fearful of the Jewish Leaders in Jerusalem. A public commitment to follow Christ put them in a dangerous position with the Jewish authorities. They had made their displeasure with the followers of Jesus well known. To follow Jesus could likely mean excommunication from the temple and local synagogues. Becoming a disciple of Jesus came at great personal cost and commitment. Evidently people were *not so* afraid that they didn't come seeking healing. The number of believers continued to increase. To be a believer did not require the same level of personal commitment and sacrifice as it did to be a disciple. By verse 16 we see that everyone, even from the towns outside Jerusalem, were bringing their sick and demon possessed (those tormented by evil spirits) to the apostles to be healed – and they were *all* healed. Think of the

growing number of people who believed, were healed and came to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. No wonder we hear in verse 17, “*the high priest and all his associates who were members of the party of the Sadducees were filled with jealousy.*”

By verses 27-28 the apostles (this time it is all the apostles, not just Peter and John) are brought before the Sanhedrin on two charges. The Apostles have violated the interdiction speaking in the name of Jesus and they possibly face a death penalty for inciting a riot (see v. 33). They were unmistakably guilty of speaking in the name of Jesus and drawing large crowds. The Sanhedrin makes the claim that Peter’s words lay the guilt of Jesus’ death upon them, potentially inciting the people against them. The phrase, to “lay someone’s blood” on someone is an Old Testament expression for a charge of murder which demands the death of the guilty party, in this case, the Sanhedrin. Ironically, Peter’s aim was to save the Sanhedrin by bringing them to repentance and acceptance of Jesus, not to seek vengeance for Jesus’ unjustified death. Peter wanted to bring the Sanhedrin to repentance and salvation. The Sanhedrin wanted to find a way to put an end to Peter and the Apostle’s activities. They had no concern for the spiritual state of their flock, or the work of God. Peter’s defense is that the Apostles must obey God rather than men (v29) and continue to preach the good news of Jesus’ resurrection and the forgiveness of sin. They must obey the same God who raised Jesus from the dead and who empowers those obedient to His will with the power of the Holy Spirit. The miracles and signs testify to the presence of the Holy Spirit and therefore to the name of Jesus and the will of God. Peter is implicitly appealing to the Sanhedrin that they too need to obey God. If they refuse to obey God, there are dire consequences. We saw the consequences faced by Ananias and Sapphira, as well as Achan, for their disbelief, disobedience and deliberate sin that would lead others astray. By their disobedience and defiance, the Sanhedrin is leading the nation of Israel into disobedience and rejection of God.

Response of the Sanhedrin: V33 “*When they heard this they were furious and wanted to put them to death.*” Theologically the Sadducees would not be swayed by Peter’s appeal to believe in the resurrection of Jesus as a sign of his messiahship. Resurrection was a doctrine they rejected. Politically Peter’s messianic message only further confirmed their opinion of this being a dangerous movement leading to an insurrection. A voice of reason restores order to the hearing as Gamaliel proposes a course of action. Gamaliel was a powerful Pharisee in the Sanhedrin, having held the position of President of the High Court. He was well respected for his understanding of Mosaic Law. He was trained by Hillel who was a famous Rabbi, and Gamaliel was the Rabbi who trained Paul. Because of his stature among the Jewish leaders he was able to step in and restore reason to the Sanhedrin. His action of dismissing the Apostles while the Sanhedrin discussed what would be done should only have been the prerogative of the High Priest, Caiaphas. It is ironic that Gamaliel advises the council to act cautiously in case they find themselves working against God and despite all the evidence before them that they indeed are working against God (V38-39).

“*Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ*” (v 42). The Apostles continue to obey God. Our passage ends with the Apostles continuing to proclaim salvation through Jesus the Messiah. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Apostles pursued what they knew to be the correct course – obeying God and not the Sanhedrin. The fact that the number of believers continued to grow was evidence that indeed God was with them, but the Sanhedrin persisted in working against God.