

Acts 4:32) Now the entire group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common. 33) With great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them. 34) For there was not a needy person among them because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of what was sold, 35) and laid them at the apostles' feet. This was then distributed to each person as any had need. 36) Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus by birth, the one the apostles called Barnabas (which is translated Son of Encouragement), 37) sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Acts 5:1) But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. 2) However, he kept back part of the proceeds with his wife's knowledge, and brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

3) *"Ananias,"* Peter asked, *"why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds of the land? 4) Wasn't it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn't it at your disposal? Why is it that you planned this thing in your heart? You have not lied to people but to God."* 5) When he heard these words, Ananias dropped dead, and a great fear came on all who heard. 6) The young men got up, wrapped his body, carried him out, and buried him. 7) About three hours later, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8) *"Tell me,"* Peter asked her, *"did you sell the land for this price?"* *"Yes,"* she said, *"for that price."* 9) Then Peter said to her, *"Why did you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out."* 10) Instantly she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men came in, they found her dead, carried her out, and buried her beside her husband. 11) Then great fear came on the whole church and on all who heard these things.

If I close my eyes I can still see in my mind the small Baptist church that shaped my childhood and teenage years. Across the front of that small church, a pulpit anchored center-stage with two large pulpit chairs on either side and behind. At stage right, a large attendance board announced the weekly worship attendance, Sunday School attendance, the amount of the offering, and the hymn numbers. At stage left hung a large panel with Church Covenant written across the top. I have in my hand a small replica of that Church Covenant. I keep it in my Bible as a reminder of a day when church members pledged and covenanted together. Listen to only one portion of the Church Covenant: *"We do now, in the presence of God and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another*

as one body in Christ....We engage, therefore, to strive for the advancement of this church....to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines.” I’ve been a Baptist for 65 years, and no doubt we’ve sustained our worship, our ordinances, and our doctrines. But **The least practiced discipline in the 21st century church is church discipline.**

As Baptists, we are people of the Book – the B-I-B-L-E. We believe the Bible contains God’s inspired truth without any mixture of error. However, belief and practice do not always line up. Believing Jesus’ formula for church discipline in Matthew 18, where the church invokes a judicial function and practicing it, do not always line up. Believing Paul’s imperative to the Corinthian church to “*remove – excommunicate,*” from their membership the church leader engaging in sexual immorality, and practicing it, do not always line up. Believing Romans 16:17 – “*Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who create divisions and obstacles contrary to the teaching that you learned. Avoid them*” and practicing it, do not always line up. Believing Galatians 6:1 – “*Brothers and sisters, if someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit...*” and practicing it, do not always line up. Believing Titus 3:10 – “*Reject a divisive person after a first and second warning*” and practicing it, do not always line up.

Written by Dr. Luke our journey through the Acts narrative has lead us to affirm that unity matters, doctrine matters, fellowship matters, worship matters, prayer matters, supernatural matters, evangelism matters, influence matters. Now the good doctor parks us at the front door of the most “uncomfortable” episode the life of the first-century church and forces us to consider: Church Discipline matters.

A Congregational Case Study

1. The Cast of the case study. After describing the prayer meeting that shook the place, Dr. Luke conscripted a second summary statement similar to the summary at the end of Acts 2. There, he described the first century Christians as those who “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.*” Here in Acts 4, Luke defined “*the entire group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common.*” There’s that word again – *koina*, a unity that crystalized and glued them together so that “*great grace was on all of them.*” Grace = *charis* > *charisma*, produced a benevolent generosity, invigorating those who owned lands or houses, to sell them, bring forward the proceeds to the apostolic leaders, who then distributed to each person as any had need. Here is the first clue in the New Testament of what charismatic looks like – benevolent generosity. Luke now introduced the characters

of this dramatic congregational episode.

- **Barnabas represents a legacy of encouragement, shaped by generosity and integrity.** His birth name was Joseph, a Levite from the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. The Levites of the Old Testament were the tribal clan subordinate in rank to the priests but given leadership in Jewish worship ceremonies. Nicknamed “*son of encouragement*,” Acts 11:23 described Barnabas as a “*good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith*.” The Antioch church sent out Barnabas to find Paul and bring him back, so they could be commissioned as the first missionaries. Barnabas also stood tall as a peacemaker in Acts 15 when sharp tensions surfaced between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. Barnabas symbolized the kind of Christian we should all aspire to be – a person of integrity, an encourager, a generous giver. Barnabas put the needs of others ahead of his own wealth, “*sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet*.” In sharp contrast to Barnabas,

- **Ananias & Sapphira represent a legacy of hypocrisy, characterized by dishonesty and distrust.** Ananias and his wife Sapphira also sold a piece of property, but instead of pledging the proceeds toward the needs of the believers, held back a portion for themselves, yet claiming to give the full value. This act of hypocrisy immediately invoked terrible judgment resulting in the sudden death of both of them. Did they die from the shock of their sin being exposed? We don’t know. Did they die from remorse or overwhelming guilt? We don’t know. Did they die of psychological fright? We don’t know, but we do know that the witnesses deduced divine judgment in the incident because “*great fear gripped them and all those who heard about it*.”

- **Peter represents a legacy of exemplary leadership, composed by wisdom and spiritual discernment.** From the incident on the Galilean beach where the resurrected Jesus restored Peter’s failure, throughout the first half of Acts, Simon Peter becomes the senior pastoral leader of the first century church. His wise confrontation of this couple and his spiritual discernment of their hypocrisy personifies the kind of leader we should look for.

- **The Church represents a legacy of unity, marked by fellowship and trust.** The first time the word church (*ecclesia*) occurs in Acts is in the context of this unusual incident. I don’t think this is accidental, for Luke is affirming that the church, those called out for the purpose of evangelizing the nations, thrives only within the context of genuine fellowship and trust.

2. The Consequences of the case study. No other similar incident of congregational discipline occurs in Acts. In form, this episode parallels other “*penalty miracles*” or miracles of divine judgement found in the Old Testament (Polhill, Acts, NAC, 160). Both Achan in Joshua 7 and Gehazi in 2 Kings 5

received harsh punishments for their sin of duplicity and dishonesty – Achan was stoned to death and Gehazi was afflicted with incurable leprosy. Nadab and Abihu laid “*unauthorized fire*” on the altar in Leviticus 10, resulting in their sudden death “*when fire came from the LORD and consumed them.*” Other penalty miracles occur later in Acts, including King Herod’s death and body eaten by worms (Acts 12). Elymas the magican lost his eyesight, but only temporarily (Acts 13) and the sons of Sceva were beaten severely (Acts 19). The judgment on Ananias and Sapphira seems so harsh, so nonredemptive, so distant from the Gospel. The severe and sudden judgment of these two identify three consequences.

- **Dishonesty is a strategy of Satan.** Peter confronted Ananias with his dishonesty: “*why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds of the land?*” Jesus referred to Satan as the “*father of all liars*” (John 8:44) and John the Revelator identified Satan as the “*deceiver of the whole world*” (Revelation 12:9) Satan filled Ananias’ heart with dishonesty resulting in his lying to the Holy Spirit, leading him to conspire with his wife to “*keep back part of the proceeds.*” The rare Greek word used here means “*to pilfer or embezzle.*” No one embezzles money from himself – therefore, Ananias influenced his wife and both of them embezzled from the church.

- **Distrust is a breach of church fellowship.** Peter reminded both Ananias and Sapphira that they were under no pressure to sell their property and under no compulsion even to give all of the proceeds, as had Barnabas. Their sin was the lie that belied the church’s unity. In filling the heart of one of its members, Satan invaded the church with the threat of distrust. In lying about the amount given, they broke a sacred trust. To betray the trust of the congregation is to lie to the Spirit that indwells the church, and to falsify the Spirit of God in an affront to God Himself. (NAC, 158)

- **Division is a disruption of spiritual power.** One of the guiding themes of the first century church is the awesome evidence of spiritual power. Luke repeated in 4:32 a consistent depiction of the body of believers: “*With great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.*” Peter exposed the embezzlement to Sapphira with the question, “*Why did you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.*” The sudden death and immediate removal of Ananias and Sapphira invokes a wake-up call: Division is a congregational disruption and will not be tolerated.

3. The Conclusions of the case study.

- **Generosity matters** – “*Not a needy person among them.*” is an unbelievable statement. (4:34) The church is not an institution or a location, but a gathering of baptized believers as covenant members, multi-generational and

multi-ethnic – a mixture of multi-social and economic challenges producing a mosaic of ministry needs. Without a spirit of generosity, needs go unmet. Unmet needs strangle the potential of any church and yield an imbalance between the “haves” and the “have nots”

- **God’s most serious judgment starts in the church.** Approximately 30 years after Peter witnessed this unusual church event, he wrote the letter First Peter. Perhaps he remembered this case study when he penned in I Peter 4:17 – *“For the time has come for judgement to begin with God’s household”* Peter was convinced that the most serious of all judgments on earth would begin in the church, not in the world, not in the government, not in the community, but in the church. Judgment starts here. Any threat to disunity and breach of fellowship brings God’s severe judgment.

- **Duplicity and distrust always destroy the church’s witness.** John Polhill, in the New American Commentary, makes this assertion: *“The church can only thrive as the people of God if it lives within the total trust of all its members. Where there is that unity of trust, that oneness of heart and minds, the church flourishes in the power of the Spirit. Where there is duplicity and distrust, its witness fails.”* (160)

NOW is the time to get RIGHT with God. If Judgment Starts Here, then it is also true that Revival and Spiritual Awakening Starts Here. One of these days, a church is going to lay aside all preferences, prejudices, and presumptions and take seriously the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. One of these days a church is going to break through the barriers of pride and pretention and begin to turn their community and city upside down for Jesus. One of these days a church is going to genuinely humble themselves, pray, seek God’s face, turn from their ways of wickedness, and experience real revival and spiritual awakening. In every church where I’ve had the privilege of being interim pastor, I keep wondering, *“Will this be the one?”* So the question before us today: *“Are you right with God, and if not, when will the time be right for you to get right with God.”*