

INTRODUCTION

The bible is very honest in recording the history of the church. It tells us about the church's strengths but it also exposes its weaknesses. Every church on earth has strengths and it has weaknesses and in the section that we are looking at today the strength of the church is highlighted but so is its weakness.

Just as the strengths of this early church were very impressive so its weaknesses are unimpressive. We must always remember that even the best church is made up of redeemed sinners and therefore sinner's sin and it ought never to surprise us although it should always grieve us when we find a member of God's church falling into sin.

Satan is actively at work seeking to tempt God's believing people into sin and the more he does so and the more we fall into sin then obviously the more discredited the church becomes. That is why we should always guard against temptation and seek God's grace to overcome it. When we do fall into sin we must immediately repent and seek God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of others if our sin involves others.

But before we look at the particular sin that was in the midst of the early church let us look at the fellowship that these early believers enjoyed. This fellowship that they enjoyed makes the sin that is recorded for us in chapter 5 all the more tragic. It shows us clearly that the church of Jesus Christ even at its best and purest is ever only one sinful act away from spiritual tragedy.

1. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH (4:32-37).

There are two aspects of the fellowship enjoyed by the church that show us something of the richness of their fellowship.

a) Unity (v 32) - We read "All the believers were one in heart and mind." The unity of this group of believers was impressive. This unity stems from a twofold commitment that can be deduced from this passage. First the believers were preoccupied with ministering to each other and helping to meet the needs of one another.

They were so intent on meeting each other's needs that they simply had no concern for satisfying their own desires and cravings. They genuinely saw other people as more important than themselves and we see this in their generosity to one another. They all were united in heart and mind in meeting the needs of their fellow believers but we will deal with this matter in more detail in a minute. For now it is sufficient to say that their unity is seen in their generosity.

But they were also united in something else they were united in declaring the wonderful message of the gospel (v 33); in other words they focused beyond themselves and were interested in reaching a lost world with the gospel message. They didn't bother about their own personal concerns as much as their determination to reach out with the gospel.

So here is a church united in two of the most important things any church can be united in, the gospel and one another. The only way any church will be one in mind and heart is when our priorities are in line with the word of God and priorities are twofold. He is concerned for the well being of his people and he is concerned with reaching the lost with the gospel.

Perhaps we all need to examine our own hearts to see if those two things are driving us on or are we far too preoccupied with ourselves and our own concerns and our own circumstances. On Wednesday we agreed our evangelism events for this year. I trust they are not just written on a piece of paper but that those events are written on our hearts. That means they will be in our

diaries and we will be praying for them and of course when the event comes round we will be inviting people and attending them so that the gospel might be able to be preached to our community. That is what it means to be one in heart and mind.

b) Sharing (vs. 32 & 34-35) - This loving unselfish unity of the early church as I said found an avenue of service in sharing their material possessions with one another. They claimed that nothing belonged to them that anything that was owned by them was the Lord's and was to be used for the good of his people. What belonged to any individual believer belonged to everyone.

This was not the attitude of a few committed individuals for we are told that "no one" claimed that any of their possessions were their own (v 32). They all understood that every possession that they had, belonged to the Lord anyway and they only possessed those things because of God's goodness to them and they were really only possessing material things and holding them in trust for the Lord.

Therefore since all God's people belong to him when there was a need among God's people then they were obligated to use God's resources to meet that need. The same is true of us. All that we have belongs to God and therefore must be used for Him and used to help God's people in need. Giving is a good test of our love for the Lord and for His church. How much are we willing to sacrifice and give for the Lord's cause?

How often do we seek to meet the needs of our fellow Christians? Of course in giving to the church we are doing that but does our giving reflect something of our love for the Lord and His church. Only you can answer that for only you and the Lord knows the extent of your giving or more importantly the extent to which we hold back our giving.

James makes some very telling comments on this subject in James 2:15-16. The Apostle John puts it even more bluntly in 1 John 3:17.

Now the extent of the giving of this early church is seen in that there was not a needy person among them (v 34), every need within the church was met by the generosity of the church. If only the modern church had the same sense of fellowship so that every need among us was met. Of course not every need is financial there are many other needs among God's people, physical, mental spiritual and psychological that with a bit of thought and a genuine concern the church of today could help towards meeting those needs. Of course even if the willingness is there, there also must be humility on the part of the recipient to have their needs met.

In our modern age pride is at the root of society and sadly it is reflected in the modern day church. It takes humility to be willing to allow someone else to meet our needs, for it is much easier to be the giver than the receiver? We all must learn to receive and there is nothing that will humble us like receiving from a fellow Christian who often is not much better off than we are.

These early believers from time to time sacrificially sold land and houses and gave the money to the apostles so that they could use it as they saw the need (vs. 34-35). This selling of property and land was totally voluntary which as we will see makes the sin of Ananias and Sapphira even worse than we might have thought.

I also want us to notice that they sold their possessions but did not dictate to the apostles where the money should be spent. In other words they left how the money should be spent to God appointed Apostles who knew the situation best anyway. Far too often in churches today we only give if we can decide where the money is going to be used. If people do not approve of where the money is going then they withhold their giving but if they do approve they give generously.

But we must give with the right heart and in our context we ought to give generously to the work of the church. The money given is used as the needs arise and to keep the work of the church going. Why is it that special projects receive a lot more money than the ongoing work of the church? The answer lies I think in the fact that we know where the money is going.

But we should give generously all the time and every church and its leaders are responsible before God for using the given money wisely.

The chapter ends by giving us an example of this sacrificial giving. The example is from a man called Barnabas, his name means “son of encouragement” and he must have been a constant encouragement to the Apostles and his giving was a constant encouragement to the church. His example represents many others in the early church who gave sacrificially out of pure love for His Lord and for the church. He is an example to us but could I call your name out or my name and say this person gives generously he or she is an encouragement to this church through their generosity?

2. THE SINS OF THE CHURCH (5:1-11)

But sadly living in the real world of the church means that we have to face the sins and failings of our fellow believers as well as enjoying their fellowship.

a) The Sin Of Lying To God - We are introduced to this married couple called Ananias and Sapphira who like many of the other believers in the early church sold a piece of property. Unlike Barnabas however Ananias with his wife's full knowledge kept back some of the money for himself. Now so far there was nothing wrong with that.

There was no sin in keeping back some of the money for himself, he could have done that but it is what happens next that reveals their sin. They tried to deceive or fool God by lying to Him about the price they received for the property. Perhaps in their mind they saw this as an opportunity to gain spiritual prestige in front of their other believers while at the same time having a little money for themselves to spend on whatever they wanted. The believers were not commanded to sell their property or to give all the proceeds from the sale to the Apostles. But because of the pride of this couple they gave the impression that they were actually making a big sacrifice in giving all the money to the Apostles.

They were indeed making a sacrifice in selling their property and giving some of the money away and we must not miss that point. But they wanted to give the impression that their sacrifice was even greater. Perhaps the unseen sin in this story is that this couple desired the approval of men more than the approval of God. It seems they wanted their fellow Christians to think well of them.

They were hypocrites giving the impression that their sacrifice was greater than it was. O they were making a sacrifice there is no question about that but their attitude made their sacrifice unacceptable.

Their plan was exposed for they did not fool Peter never mind God. Peter was no doubt led and guided by the Holy Spirit here to see through this couple's hypocrisy. Ananias no doubt expected the praise of the people for his generous gift but he must have been stunned when Peter tells him that what he has done was satanically inspired (v 3). Ananias had not only lied to the Apostles and to the church but by far the most important person he had lied to was the Holy Spirit. The sad thing in this story is that the sin was totally unnecessary.

If they did not want to sell the land they didn't have too, then it would have still been under their trust to be used in whatever way the couple thought best. Even after it was sold Peter tells Ananias that it was totally up to him and Sapphira to use the money as they wanted too (v 4).

Ananias was under no compulsion and no pressure to sell his property or to donate the proceeds to meet the needs of others.

But the real problem lies within the heart, what made him think of trying to deceive God by lying to Him. No doubt Satan had a hand in the situation by tempting him but the responsibility for the sin lies firmly with Ananias. He had the freedom to do what he wanted with his property and the money but he chose to be deceitful.

Peter does not blame Satan here for the bible nowhere places the blame for a Christian's sin on Satan. He is no doubt active behind the scenes but it was Ananias who gave into his temptation and who chose to deceive others by lying.

Sin is always serious and should never be trifled with. Sin is always first and foremost against God and therefore in order to show how serious sin is God makes an example of Ananias and Sapphira as a warning to us all not to trifle with sin. God moves quickly to remove the spiritual cancer from this early church (vs. 5-10).

On hearing Peter's word Ananias died on the spot and the result was that fear gripped all that heard what had happened. The ultimate cause of Ananias death was God's judgement whether there was a physical cause like a heart attack does not matter, the clear point of the incident is that sin is serious and sin has wages that must be paid which is death.

I think it is a sobering truth that God sometimes takes the life of sinning believers in order to teach others in the church a very important truth. Death is God's ultimate discipline for believers. He longs for a pure church, He hates sin and He longs that His people will deal with all sin in their lives and that every church will deal with sin within its membership.

Do you remember in Corinth that some died because they abused the ordinance of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:30).

After the death of Ananias his body was removed and buried. About three hours later Sapphira came in not knowing what had happened to her husband. We do not know where so was all this time, perhaps at home? Peter asked her a question about the property she sold and the money in order to give her an opportunity to acknowledge her sin and repent of it (v 8).

The question is worded in such a way that she either had to tell the truth or lie. It was a simple yes or no answer. She chose to lie rather than tell the truth and face up to her sin by repenting. Pride is an awful thing, it gets in the way of truthfulness, it is a great hindrance to repentance. Peter immediately exposes her sin (v 9), and pronounced the same judgement upon her as happened to her husband.

She likewise immediately died and was taken out and buried beside her husband. The action of God in this incident is meant to impress upon the church of all ages the seriousness of the sins of believers. Just because we are forgiven and justified does not give us the right to sin or to take sin lightly. God's actions had the desired effect upon the early church (v 11). Fear gripped the people. One of the benefits of church discipline of whatever form is that it deters others from taking sin lightly or from sinning and thinking that no one is really bothered. Sadly many churches today brush sin under the carpet because they are not courageous enough to take the necessary disciplinary action to deal with a sinning believer.

The result is that believers are led to think that sin is not as serious as we are led to believe. If leaders of the church do not take it seriously by acting out of love towards a sinning believer in discipline then it will not be long before the whole church plays with sin and the end result is that God is robbed of the glory due to his name and the church of Jesus Christ is discredited.

No doubt as a result of this incident there was much heart searching that went on within the church. Many no doubt examined themselves before God. Perhaps there were other sins that were repented off and forgiven. But this disciplinary action was also a witness to the world. We are told in verse 11 that fear gripped the church “and all who heard about these events.”

No doubt unbelievers heard about what had happened in the church and started to ponder the gospel message and many were fearful of what God might do next. Many churches are afraid to act in church discipline because they do not want to wash their dirty linen in public. Of course no church seeks to take disciplinary action to show the world that it is serious about sin.

But if the world hears about what the church has done to a sinning believer then at least they will be able to say that we are consistent. We practise what we preach. For we preach that we are sinners and that sin must be judged by God.

If that is true then church discipline says clearly that we are serious about sin within believers as well as unbelievers and believers who sin and refuse to repent are judged or disciplined by God just like unbelievers. Perhaps if more churches were serious about sin in the church and did something about it, then the unbelieving world might begin to take the gospel message seriously.

The old saying about the church being full of hypocrites is sadly often true but let us never allow that saying to be true of our church. Let’s all take sin seriously and root it out of our lives and when necessary let us be bold and take disciplinary action as outlined in the bible against any believer who sins and refuses to repent and seek forgiveness. Remember God desires a pure church and even when the church fails to act he will not stand by and watch.

Amen