

## ***One For the Money, Two For the Show: The Case of Ananias and Sapphira***

### **A Sermon Based on Acts 4: 32 - 5:11<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **1. Introduction**

It is alleged that the Pope was once showing Thomas Aquinas the fabulous treasury of the Vatican. “The church can no longer say ‘Silver and Gold have I none’” said the Pope. Aquinas, quick on the mark replied “Neither can it say, ‘In the name of Jesus of Nazareth rise up and walk.’”<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to the topic of money and the church, there seems to be a strong ambivalence in our approaches. The one pole of ambivalence tends towards the conservative and mediocre (represented by sayings like: “we don’t or are not allowed to preach or teach about money”, “when there are finances involved, you are always looking for trouble”, “we need to have faith in God alone...and he will supply our needs.”). The opposite pole of ambivalence tends toward the free and extravagant (represented by sayings like: “name it and claim it”, “sowing in abundance will result in reaping in abundance”, “faith without hints is dead”). We thus, in practice, find a stark contrast between the church mouse and televangelist identities, the paupered parson and the prosperous preacher personalities. Theological institutions and all Christians need to be challenged from God’s Word regarding what good stewardship means to us and in many ways we have to admit, that the reason we are getting it wrong in the pew, is because we are presenting it incorrectly in the pulpit...and the reason we are getting it wrong in the pulpit is because we are presenting it incorrectly in the seminary curriculum.

There are many biblical passages we could consider to provide us with stewardship principles, but Acts 4:32 – 5:11 is one of the earliest New Testament examples of how the Early Church gave expression to the practice of stewardship.

It was with great excitement that the birth of the Early Church was announced to the world. That excitement is recorded for us in the book of Acts. With the words of the Great Commission fresh in their minds the Early Church set their sights on the four corners of the Earth to spread the Gospel message. The Book of Acts, like a photo album, provides us with some snapshots into the activities of the Early Church. These narrative snapshots provide us with some of the hallmarks of early Christianity such as simplicity, community, evangelism,

love and stewardship. There was little or no formal organisation; no church buildings to maintain and activities were financed through personal giving. In our Scripture passage we have taken a look at one of these snapshots, a snapshot highlighting an important characteristic of the early church, which presents us with a challenge:

## **2. “ The Early Church Practiced a Balanced, Sacrificial and Authentic Stewardship”**

The message that this particular “snapshot” conveys, plays an important role in the overall message of the book of Acts. Verse 33 tells us that it was “[W]ith great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (NIV)<sup>3</sup>...power that undoubtedly came as a result of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, but very interestingly narratively sandwiched between verses speaking about their stewardship attitude. The opening verses of the passage present us with something, which looks like a group photo (just like the ones we take of the Institute participants). Lets look at verse 32 again, “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had”(NIV). I suggest that here the early church practised a form of good, biblical “communism.” “What’s mine is ours!”. This is not to suggest that the Bible supports a political and economic ideology that we have seen crumble over the past few years, for indeed the Bible cuts across and transcends all modern systems of economics and ideology. Blomberg (1999:82) says that in the Bible “neither the amassing of riches nor the lack is seen as a necessary good (or evil)”. While there are parallels in the Bible to some aspects of Capitalism and some aspects of Communism, there is the denouncing of social injustice and the call for liberation of people no matter what the system, especially if it goes against the principles of God.

As a result of their unselfish attitude in giving, the apostles were enabled and continued to propagate the Gospel. This is where balanced, sacrificial and authentic stewardship begins, a positive, correct attitude concerning possessions. We need to pause here for a moment to reflect on the picture again so that we don’t think we saw something there that was not really there or that we possibly misunderstand the picture. The Early Church was not caught up in some sort of euphoria or even a millennial fever where people often say “Oh the Lord is coming...I must sell everything that I have and wait for the rapture to occur.” No, that would be a misunderstanding of the passage. What Luke is showing us here is the result of what the Spirit’s coming was upon the church which caused a change in attitude regarding

possessions, this of course goes against the natural selfish tendencies of us as people. Verse 34 tells us that there were “no needy persons among them” (NIV) for many “who owned lands or houses sold them”(NIV) and brought the proceeds of what they sold and laid it at the Apostles’ feet.

The important element then that contributed to balanced, sacrificial and authentic stewardship was their *attitude* towards their possessions, an attitude of sharing of resources. This passage does not say that everybody sold everything they owned and spent the money on one another and that they had a big party. No! It was a situation of radical sharing when they saw a need. When they perceived needs, they then took the proceeds of the sale and in an act of dedication laid the money at the Apostles feet for them to distribute it to the needy. For many of them, it was a case of radical sacrifice! Having sketched this overall picture of the Early Church, it is now almost as if Luke takes a red pen and begins to point out some specific people in the snapshot by drawing circles around them. He does this in order to illustrate the point he has just made in verses 32 to 36 and shows us two specific and contrasting examples (*one for the money, two for the show*) relating to this characteristic of the Early Church regarding their possessions.

### **3. Barnabas – “One For the Money”**

The first example (v36-37) is of a certain individual by the name of Joseph (*One For the Money!*) who became better known by the name Barnabas, a name given to him by the Apostles because of the way he encouraged them. This name change was possibly inspired by a very evident change in his personal attitude, especially regarding his possessions. Barnabas owned some property, sold it and laid the entire proceeds of the sale at the Apostles feet. It is interesting to note that Barnabas is identified as a Levite. Not only was it unusual for a Levite to own property according to Old Testament instructions (Nm 18:20,24, etc), but also that here was a Levite who allowed his gift to become a specific, significant and good example of the correct attitude toward possessions accompanied by the correct motive for doing what he did, selling and giving the proceeds to the Apostles in order for need to be met.

### **4. Ananias and Sapphira – “Two For the Show”**

The second example occurs in 5:1-10 and is presented to us as a bad example of a couple’s attitude concerning the handling of their possessions. In order to highlight the absolute

tragedy of Ananias and Sapphira (*Two for the Show!*), Luke allocates ten verses to give a detailed description of the type of stewardship attitude, which does not please God, ten verses in order to warn readers lest they also fall into the same trap of hypocrisy, lying and self-advertisement. The important principle here is that stewardship and spirituality are inextricably connected (Powell 2007:8). If we are spiritually unbalanced then our stewardship will also be unbalanced. Within the context of the Early Church and the selling of possessions, the Bible tells that Ananias and Sapphira also decided to sell some property that they owned and then to give part of the money to the Apostles for distribution. Now there was nothing wrong with that in itself, what was wrong is what is anticipated by the knowledge that they kept part back and presented part as the whole. When Ananias went to the Apostles and laid it at their feet it becomes clearer in the ensuing discussion between Ananias and Peter that Ananias presented the money as the full portion. Everyone who went through the process of selling possessions and laying it at the Apostles feet was performing a public act of sacrifice. Gene Getz (1990:387) suggests that this passage in Acts teaches that, “Christians need to be able to observe other believers who are faithful in sharing their material possessions.” Now you know as well as I do that if someone’s generosity is publicly acknowledged that it is all too easy to get big-headed about it and it is easy to want to do it again in order to get public recognition again. Giving under those circumstances is hypocritical giving...not giving out of love and concern but rather for self-gratification and self-advertisement. That is precisely what Ananias was guilty of; he had kept back part and presented the other part as the full profit sacrificially being dedicated to the needy. The full name of the book of Acts is the *Acts of the Apostles*, in other words the acts or actions of the Apostles. I agree with those who suggest that the book should more correctly be named the *Acts of the Holy Spirit* (Carson 1992:181) because it is by the power of the Spirit of God that the church was birthed and enabled the Apostles and others to minister the Gospel. It is here in this passage that we once again see the Acts of the Holy Spirit, that God cannot be mocked, that the Holy Spirit cannot be lied to, that the opportunity to participate in the stewardship ministry is not open to be used by anybody in order to further their own causes or bring glory to themselves. Ananias lied and as a result was struck dead and the same fate befell his wife because she also lied. The money they made from the sale of the land was theirs to deal with as they wished, but they lied about it, presented the part as the whole and did so publicly and were therefore struck down publicly.

## 5. **Balanced Yet Sacrificial Christian Stewardship**

At this point you might probably be thinking that I am going to use that as a cue to start talking about tithing and to take you on a “guilt trip” regarding tithing as many have done with this passage. Actually this passage does not deal with tithing but don’t get too comfortable; fasten your seat belts because we may be in for an uncomfortable and challenging ride through “the roller-coaster” ride of the stewardship implications of this passage! This passage has been included in the Scriptures, along with many others, in order to teach us to develop a proper, balanced and sacrificial Christian perspective on stewardship. We have become guilty of teaching a “stewardship” legalistically reduced to the paying of a tithe...one tenth of our income...on a Sunday morning! Tithing is only one tenth of Christian stewardship! At best it is the starting point but not the goal; it is only one aspect of developing an overall biblical view about everything that we own and what our responsibilities are in relation to those possessions.

The “bottom line” about stewardship is that God owns everything (e.g. Ps 89:11), that God has all the money in the world and that God lends (places into our custodianship) that money, possessions, the talents, the time and the gifts, to us. God expects us as his people to use those things he has placed under our custodianship to further the kingdom’s purposes. We must not imagine “Okay, I have paid my tithe...my one tenth...that part which belongs to God...and now I can do whatever I want to with the remaining nine-tenths...it is mine! Tithing, at best is only a starting point for developing a broader and more biblical, even programmatic approach to stewardship and especially to giving. Ron Sider (1997:193-196), speaks of the “graduated tithe” and again describes this story in Acts as an astonishing economic sharing that produced evangelistic results (Sider 2005: 36). The very possession of gifts carries the responsibility to use them according to the will of the ultimate donor, who is God. One problem that seems to have crept into the church is a secular materialism with an obsession with bigger and bigger buildings, luxuries, facilities and programmes which have stifled spirituality. As Christian educators we have become guilty of not teaching the proper perspective or not teaching it at all. The acquiring of material wealth is not inherently bad, but it is what you do with it that can be bad... starting with our attitude towards material possessions, the use of our material possessions in relation to God’s kingdom and our spirit in distributing those resources. I believe that it was William Foulkes who said “ The true disciple of Jesus is neither the miser nor a spendthrift, but a steward.”<sup>4</sup> and here I would like to add, the *balanced* steward.

## 6. Conclusion

I know that it is abuses by churches and pastors and tele-evangelists that have caused the area of money and/or stewardship to almost become swear words in the church or taboos of the pulpit and this can partly explain its absence from the seminary classroom, but we need to remember that abuse of “giving” never excuses our failure to provide proper biblical teaching on stewardship! The very passage showed a good example and a bad example, but never suggested that the practice be stopped. We are presented with a “contrast of faithfulness versus foolishness” (Blomberg 1999:55), rather be *one for the money* like Barnabas, than *two for the show*, namely Ananias and Sapphira. What we need in our churches and seminaries is to preach, teach and demonstrate a more balanced approach to stewardship. Not a “give as you give, give it unto the Lord and the Lord will give it back unto you” as evident in popular theology, neither do we need to make it our business to try and remind God about his “promises” and when giving to God accompany it with a formulaic prayer (the old pull on the handle of the heavenly slot machine awaiting the coins in our purses to cling!). Rather as a sign of our commitment to Christ, just like the early church, to view our possessions as a means to furthering the kingdom of God. If that happens, then I believe that no missionary organisation will ever have to beg for money, no Christian organisation will ever have to run into the red financially like many are already doing. These are there to assist us as local churches in the task of ministering the Gospel in power, if we teach properly then we will never have to make financial appeals, but that there would be enough as verse 35 says “to be distributed to each as any needed.” The final verse of the passage declares that, “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these events” (NIV). The “fear” spoken of here was probably not so much a fear of being “scared” (for those outside of the church it probably did!), but rather one of reverence to God in acknowledging the importance of the lesson. Given the far-reaching implications of this passage, we must all face the question: “What are we going to do to teach a balanced and authentic stewardship?” It is going to have to start in the changing of our attitudes, secondly as modern day Levites (ministers) we are going to have to set the example and be willing to demonstrate sacrifice, and then be willing to teach it!

## 7. Notes

1. This sermon was delivered at the Institute for Excellence in Christian Leadership Development (Finance and Stewardship) hosted by Overseas Council International in Cape Town, July 2007.
2. Illustrative story slightly adapted from Watson D 1989 *I Believe in the Church* London: Hodder and Stoughton, page 187.
3. This sermon was preached using the text of the New International Version of the Bible. All direct Scripture quotes are taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Used by permission.
4. Source of this quote uncertain.

## **8. Bibliography**

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