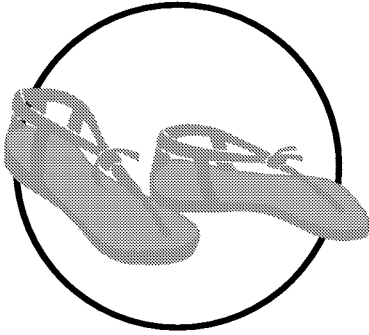


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Challenges from Within and Without

BACKGROUND NOTES

There are several issues in this session which will resonate with members of Christian congregations. One measure of the depth of community is whether or not the members are willing to sacrifice for each other. Are they willing to “invest” in the community in a substantial way? The early church’s practice of holding things in common is not so very different from church members today being willing to care for the financial needs of a member who has come into hard times.

Luke says a great deal about money and possessions in his Gospel and in Acts. There is a very real struggle that goes on in the human heart between the desire to let go and trust God and the desire to hang on and trust one’s bankbook. Many people define themselves and their worth by their money and possessions. This may be at least one reason why the subject of money is such a touchy one in the church. Christians should not be measuring their worth by their money, but by God’s love for them. Luke is very aware of this struggle with the meaning and use of money and uses every opportunity to raise the warning flag about it.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is important for Luke. Here are members of the Christian community who cling to their possessions while pretending to be brothers and sisters in Christ. It is that kind of double-mindedness that can kill the church. Do not attempt to soften the story or to make excuses for it. Luke intends it to be stark and final. The question to ask is not, “How can a nice group of people like the church allow such a thing to happen?”

but “Can the church survive as Christ’s representative in the world if people like Ananias and Sapphira go unchallenged?” Let the story stand. Let the group think about it without making excuses for it.

The actions of Barnabas provide a contrast to the lying pair. Barnabas is an important figure in Acts because he is an example of a true Christian and because he brings out the gifts of others without jealousy or envy. His true concern is for the success of the church. The ability to bring the right people to the fore is as valuable an asset as the ability to preach or to heal.

In this session we see challenges from within the young church (Ananias and Sapphira) and also from outside forces (the Sanhedrin). Remember the way in which Luke forms parallels between the life of Jesus and the life of the church. The Sanhedrin and the Temple officials are the same people who made sure that Jesus was killed. But just as Jesus could not be stopped by them, neither can the church. Luke is showing here that nothing can stop the gospel. Make sure that the group continues to see this theme as it runs throughout all of Acts. The purpose of the church is to further the influence and power of the gospel regardless of the cost, regardless of the enemy.

Another issue familiar to members of congregations is the issue of administration in the church. It sometimes happens that people in a congregation are put into administrative positions not because of their spiritual maturity or their loyalty to the community but because they know how to fix boilers and keep books. The early faith community looked at administration as a ministry, one to be carried out by people “full of the Spirit.” If there is time, explore with the group their thinking about church administration at the local level. Ministry in the congregation is not restricted to preaching and teaching. Any work that helps the church to keep going in the living of its gospel is an essential ministry.

Note, too, that the structure of administration is dictated by the needs of the community. Leaders are not selected in order to honor them, but in order that they may serve the needs of the people. When leadership roles are perceived, at least by the leaders, as positions of honor and power instead of positions of servanthood to the community, damage is done to the faith community. The form of church administration needs to be flexible enough to allow the church to implement its ministries in a variety of situations.

It may be well to explore with the group the locus of most of the threats to today's congregations: are they external or internal threats? Money and administration should not be secondary concerns for Christians; they are powerful servants when given to the community for the gospel's use. They are powerful enemies when they are downplayed or ignored.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. State what the stories of Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira tell us about the attitude toward money in the early church.
2. Describe their understanding of why and how church members today should share their resources.
3. Cite the reasons the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin opposed the work of the apostles.
4. Summarize the qualifications and responsibilities of the deaconal ministers selected in Acts 6 and relate these to the work of deacons today.

Resources You May Need

A spoon, a pineapple, a serrated knife, cans of ginger ale, a can opener, a gallon of ice cream, a punch bowl and cups

A recording of a song about money

Copies of Resource Sheet 5A

Newsprint, markers, tape, chalkboard

Copies of the questions for Activity #1 in Exploring the Scripture

Copies of prayers of dedication for an offering

Copies of the church by-laws about deacons

Slips of paper and pencils

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Divide the group into three sections. Distribute to each section one of the following pairs: a spoon and pineapple, a serrated edged knife and two or three cans of ginger ale with the pop tops removed, a puncture style can opener and a gallon of ice cream. Instruct the groups to prepare the food item they have been given for consumption using the utensils provided. Allow a minute or so before suggesting the sections collaborate by sharing the utensils. Then combine ingredients in a bowl to make a fruit punch to share together. Cite Acts 4:32 as you ask for God's blessing on the food.

and/or

There are many songs about money in the world of country music, blues, and rock and roll (for example, "Money" by Pink Floyd or "Money Makes the World Go 'Round" by Cabaret). Play a bit of one of these songs or another of your choice as participants form in pairs to complete the following sentences, which you have posted on newsprint at the front of the room:

- Being broke feels...
- Being generous feels...
- Paying bills feels...
- Discovering I have lost money feels...
- Being asked for money feels...
- Encountering God's generosity makes me feel...

After a few minutes reconvene the group and invite participants to share some of the ways they completed the sentences. Which sentence was the most difficult to complete? Which one was the easiest to complete? Why? What do these responses say about our attitude toward money?

or

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 5A and ask the group to form in pairs for the activity. After about five minutes, reconvene the whole group and invite participants to share their choices. Ask what these choices indicate regarding the group's feeling about money.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. The subject of money is not unique to Acts. In the activities which follow, your group will have the opportunity to compare some of Jesus' teachings in the Third Gospel with attitudes toward material possessions in the early church.

Below are listed six passages from the Gospel of Luke which deal with the issue of money and God's rule. List several on newsprint and ask a different member of the group to read each one aloud.

Luke 12:13-21

Luke 16:19-31

Luke 21:1-4

Luke 12:22-31

Luke 18:18-25

Luke 22:1-6

As each text is read, lead the group in discussing the following questions:

- Who are the main characters in the story?
- What is the situation or issue the passage addresses?
- What is said about money?
- What is your response to the text?

and/or

Divide the group into small groups of five or six persons. Assign each small group either Acts 2:42-47 or Acts 4:32-35. They are to read the passage and discuss the questions below. Give the groups a copy of the assignment and ask each group to select a recorder to summarize the group's responses to these questions:

- Why did the early Christians share their resources?
- What other characteristics of their life together are mentioned in the text?
- How is their sharing related to these other qualities?
- In what ways does your congregation encourage members to share their resources?

After about ten minutes reconvene the whole group and ask the recorders to make their reports. Invite participants to make comparisons between the material in the two chapters of Acts and Jesus' teachings in Luke.

2. Ask group members to form in pairs. One person in each pair is to represent the viewpoint of Barnabas; the other, the perspective of Ananias and Sapphira. They are all to review Acts 4:36-5:11 and take turns responding to the question, "What reasons did you have for handling your finances the way you did in this story?"

After a few minutes reconvene the whole group and invite persons to share their responses. Note the most common reasons given. Ask how the reasons are related to Barnabas's or Ananias and Sapphira's beliefs about God and the church.

and/or

Ask everyone to turn to the section in the *Resource Book* entitled "True or False?" Point out the various options Ananias and Sapphira had, according to Dr. Miller. Then note the things Dr. Miller says their actions revealed about themselves.

Invite members of the group to share their honest responses to the story. Do they think the outcome is too severe? In what way did Ananias and Sapphira's deceit threaten the life of the young church?

Shift the discussion to the church today. How does your congregation raise funds to support its life and mission? Do you have a financial campaign with estimates of giving or pledges? Do you take an offering at each worship service? If so, where is the offering placed in the service? What do these practices imply about the church's understanding of money?

and

Distribute copies of one or more prayers of dedication used at the time of the offering. These can be found in denominational collections of worship resources. What motivation for giving is implied in the prayers? What results are expected or hoped for? Save one of the copies for use during the closing.

3. In Acts 5:17-42 the council once again takes action against the apostles. Note the growing popularity of the young church. Then introduce the three persons who agreed to present brief reports on the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Sanhedrin. Or, give the reports yourself. A Bible dictionary will provide the essential background information, but the reports should be focused on why these groups would have opposed the apostles in the situation described in this passage.

Invite members of the group to question those giving the reports about their concerns and motivations. To what extent do participants consider the responses appropriate? Note the familiar statement of Peter and the apostles in 5:29 (compare 4:19-20). Summarize Gamaliel's advice. Ask the group, "Was this wise counsel or not?"

and/or

Prepare a mock television report on the trial. To do this introduce the eight persons you recruited at the previous session to take the following roles:

High priest	Peter
a Sadducee	another apostle
a Pharisee	Gamaliel
a prison guard	a Temple guard

Send these people to different parts of the room and form the remaining members of the group into eight clusters. Each cluster is to interview one of the persons at the trial and prepare a twenty- to thirty-second report.

After five or six minutes, reconvene the whole group and introduce the television newspaper person recruited at the last session. This person will call on the various clusters for their "on-the-scene" reports. Once again, note the statement of Peter and the apostles in 5:29.

4. The next challenge the young church confronts is how to deal with the administrative details that come with growth. Invite group members to review Acts 6:1-7. Then lead a discussion focused on these questions:

- What is the reason seven new “helpers” are appointed to assist the apostles?
- What credentials are most important in their selection?
- How would you describe the work they are to do?
- Which group or groups in your congregation is/are responsible for similar work? What are their credentials and how are they selected?

and/or

The seven “helpers” may be the prototypes of church deacons. If your congregation has a Board of Deacons, distribute copies of the section in your by-laws or constitution which describes their qualifications and duties. Compare these with the information about Stephen and his colleagues in Acts 6.

CLOSING

1. Hand out slips of paper with the title of one of your church’s administrative staff or officers on each one. Titles you might include are: secretary, office administrator, treasurer, Sunday School superintendent, women’s group president, caretaker, pastor, elders, deacons, trustees. Ask participants to write out a one-sentence prayer for the person(s) named on their slips and be prepared to read it during the circle prayer in closing. Invite participants to continue to pray for those person(s) throughout the week.

or

Read in unison one of the prayers of dedication used in Activity #2 above.

Looking Ahead

1. Under Setting the Stage in the next session, it is suggested you display pictures and articles about contemporary Christians who have suffered for their faith. See the activity for details.
2. In Activity #1 under Exploring the Scripture in the next session, it is suggested three persons give two- to three-minute reports on blasphemy, the history and importance of the Temple, and Moses and the Law. See the activity for more information.
3. In Activity #3 in the same section, it is suggested two persons give short reports on the term martyr and the punishment of stoning.

Resource 5A

I Would Never!

In discussion with your partner, read the four numbered sentences below and select the phrase in bold type which best describes how you would be likely to act.

I would never... **I would be unlikely to...** **I absolutely would...**

1. ...consider getting rid of all I have and traveling unburdened by possessions for a year to anywhere in the world I wished.
2. ...give all the money I had in my pocket to someone who needed it, even if I were a few days away from payday.
3. ...find a way to ask a member of my church if everything was okay financially if I thought there might be a problem.
4. ...work for a year for a mission without pay, trusting that God would provide for my needs.