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Summary

Possessions are shared within the young Christian community in order that all may have necessities. Ananias and Sapphira's lying about their possessions poses a threat to the survival of the church.

The apostles' acts of healing excite the populace but threaten the Temple officials and the Sadducees. All the apostles are arrested and put into prison, but they escape through angelic intervention and continue to proclaim the gospel. The apostles are brought before the council. Rabbi Gamaliel cautions the council and advises it to leave the apostles and their community alone. The apostles are whipped and released. They return to the disciples, where all pray for boldness. Their prayer is answered.

The growth of the church demands that new methods of administration be implemented. Seven men are chosen to oversee the distribution of food to the widows among them. The church continues to grow and adds many priests to its membership.

Basic Bible References

Acts 4:32-6:7

Word List

Sanhedrin angel Rabbi Gamaliel Hellenists 5



Challenges from Within and Without

Sharing Possessions

The early Christian church knew how to care for its own. Read Acts 4:32-35. Members were not forced to give up their possessions or to sell them, but there was an understanding among the members of an "all for one and one for all" spirit. Any Christian in need could count on the others to be more concerned about that need than about their possessions. They operated under the premise that Augustine, a theologian of the fourth and fifth centuries, would later state openly: "He who has more than he needs possesses the goods of another." It is true in most congregations today that if they are made aware of a critical need of a member, that need can and will be cared for by the faith community. It is important, therefore, for the members to know each other and to have some systematic way of keeping in touch. It would bring shame on a congregation if one of its members were found to be going hungry.

It is the power of the resurrected Christ present in the church through the Holy Spirit that makes it possible for naturally greedy and self-serving human beings to give generously and willingly to others. Justin Martyr, a great figure in the early church, was in awe of God's power to change the selfish heart: "We who once coveted most greedily the wealth and fortune of others, now place in common the goods we possess, dividing them with all the needy." 1

¹ I Apology 14:2-3, quoted in Willimon, Acts, p. 53.

True or False?

Now read Acts 4:36-5:11. Joseph of Cyprus—nicknamed Barnabas, "son of encouragement"—is introduced here. Barnabas is an important figure in Acts. We will see him again. He embodies the spirit of the communal style of life that Luke has been describing. He decides to sell a field and give the proceeds to the church. He does so and lays the money at the apostles' feet. All is fine. But in a contrasting story (Luke, remember, frequently uses contrasting stories back-to-back) two other members of the community, Ananias and Sapphira, voluntarily sell a piece of property and then lie to the apostles about the price. They could have said they were only giving part of the proceeds to the church, and all would have been well; they could have refrained from selling the property at all with no negative consequences. But they conspired to lie to the community, perhaps in order to look righteous while at the same time putting their real trust in possessions.

Peter explains to Ananias precisely what he has done. In lying to the church, he has lied to God. The church is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit of God. Ananias and Sapphira have planned to lie and to steal from God. In doing so they reveal that although they professed to be members of the community of the Holy Spirit, they did not recognize the church as the representative of God. They put their trust for their well-being in their possessions, not in the love and fellowship of the community. Their faith was not in God but in security. Luther once remarked that security was the ultimate idol. Instead of repenting and asking forgiveness, Ananias drops dead, perhaps from the shock of a hopeless situation. Peter, having seen Sapphira's frame of mind, predicts her own reaction. There is nothing here to indicate that Peter caused these people's deaths. What happened to them they brought on themselves.

This scene may appear severe to many, and it is. But the church is no game. Ananias and Sapphira's deceit threatened the very life of the new community, for to allow such a spirit to grow unchecked would have destroyed the entire fellowship. When members of a church will not confront evil and self-serving in their fellowship, it destroys the fellowship altogether. The desire not to have any confrontations or "bad feelings" in the community leads to a false fellowship and a church that cannot do the will of God. "Great fear seized the whole church...." There is a new level of understanding about what the church really is. Jesus had warned those who were too eager to become disciples to "count the cost" (Luke 14:28).

The Second Confrontation

Read Acts 5:12-26. The twelve apostles have the healing power of their Master. People are not so much afraid of the apostles as they are in awe of them. The church is growing rapidly. Notice that all this takes place in the Temple precincts. The gospel is still gathering followers among the Jews only. As was the case with Jesus, the popularity of the apostles incites jealousy in the religious and political leaders. The high priest and the Sadducees are determined to put an end to the Jesus movement once and for all. But they are powerless to stop it.

The gathering of Jewish leaders who oppose the apostles is referred to as "the council." This is the Sanhedrin, the Jewish "supreme court." It was composed mainly of the chief priests of the Temple, several representatives of the aristocracy, the leading scribes, and the religious lawyers. Two main religious "parties" were represented: the Sadducees and Pharisees. The Sadducees were the aristocracy and were in favor with the Temple leaders. They had a vested interest in keeping the status quo. The Pharisees were zealous observers of Jewish religious law. The scribes most likely belonged to the party of the Pharisees. The high priest of the Temple was the convener and president of the Sanhedrin, which was the internal government of Israel and the primary religious authority. It was recognized throughout the Roman world by all Jewish communities. Its power was restricted by the Roman Empire. For one thing, the Sanhedrin was not permitted to carry out capital punishment.

A Messenger of God

Luke speaks more about angelic interventions than most other New Testament authors, although he never explains just what he means by the term. The word "angel" in Greek means "messenger," and that is the function of angels in both Luke and Acts. Although Luke sometimes describes them simply as "men" (Luke 24:4), they occasionally have unusual powers (see Acts 12:7, 10b). There is some humor in the fact that those who have been jailed by the Sadducees are released by an angel, since Sadducees did not believe in angels. In fact, this whole scene has several comic aspects: the apostles popping out of prison as quickly as they are put in; the council waiting for the apostles to be brought in and being told by one person that they have disappeared and by another that they are out preaching in the street. Just as the trial scene with Jesus and his enemies was not the end of the gospel, neither will any trial scenes involving Jesus' followers mean the end of the gospel. The gospel cannot be arrested. Here is another message for Theophilus and a threatened church.

Gamaliel's Strategy

Continue reading with Acts 5:27-42. The apostles again stand before their enemies. The high priest is concerned that the apostles are trying to lay the blame for Jesus' death on him and on the council. He reiterates his order for the preaching to cease. Peter and the apostles repeat their answer that they must "obey God rather than any human authority."

Again the arrest provides an opportunity to proclaim the gospel. The Temple leaders are indeed guilty (verse 30), but forgiveness is offered. This is part of the message of the resurrection. Not only are the apostles witnesses to the resurrection, but so is the Holy Spirit, who enables them to speak the truth in a hostile environment. Peter's continued assertion that the great religious leaders of Israel have sinned and need forgiveness enrages them.

The apostles are rescued from the council's murderous intent by Rabbi Gamaliel. Gamaliel was one of the most respected men in all Israel, hailed as a great teacher (rabbi). One of his most illustrious students was the man who became Saint Paul (Acts 22:3). It is interesting that Gamaliel is not a Sadducee but a Pharisee, for Pharisees believed in both the resurrection from the dead and in angels.

The apostles are out of the room when Gamaliel makes his speech, but there may well have been supporters of the church present to report what went on. John's Gospel tells us that Nicodemus, a secret follower of Jesus, was a Pharisee and "a leader of the Jews" (3:1), and Mark says that Joseph of Arimathea was a "respected member of the council" (Mark 15:43). John adds that this Joseph was also a secret disciple of Jesus (John 19:38). In addition, Luke will tell us that "a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

Gamaliel's counsel is very rational. If these apostles and their supporters are simply another flash-in-the-pan group like so many others, the movement will die out in no time, since the leader has already been killed. If, however, they do belong to God, the religious leaders may find themselves opposing God. Time will tell; the council need not get involved. Here was a message Luke almost certainly wanted the leaders of his own day to heed as well.

Although the council agrees with Gamaliel, that does not stop it from having the apostles flogged, a practice that had killed many men. The order not to speak "in the name of Jesus" will once again be utterly ignored. The apostles take great joy in the fact that they are linked so closely with the name of Jesus that they are punished for it. The kingdom of God reverses the values of this world: the apostles count themselves "worthy to suffer dishonor"—worthy

by their courage in Jesus to be counted as unworthy by the world. The apostles continue to proclaim Jesus "in the Temple and at home."

Division of Labor

The swelling number of Christ's followers causes some very practical problems for the church leaders. Read **Acts 6:1-7**. The Hellenists mentioned here are Greek-speaking Jews, probably those who had lived outside of Israel for a time. Widows had no legal protection. They were totally dependent on the compassion of the community. The complaint from the Hellenists is that in the daily distribution of alms (donated food) their widows are not being treated evenhandedly.

The apostles contend that keeping track of this distribution is not in line with their job description, which is "prayer and...serving the word." Their comment in verse 2 is not meant as a "put-down." A new ministry needs to be created. The preacher cannot be expected to do it all. Moses tried to do it all when the Hebrew people were wandering in the wilderness, but his father-in-law showed him the need for delegating and for a division of labor (Exodus 18:13-26). The early church was willing to change its way of doing business as needs dictated. There was no rigid form; rather form followed function. Growth means change. The whole community agrees to turn over administration to a new group.

The seven new leaders all have Greek names. The concern was fairness for the Hellenist widows. Those who are chosen to administer the distribution program are members of the same minority. The apostles pray for them and lay hands on them. The laying on of hands was practiced in the Old Testament (Numbers 27:18-20, 22-23). Although in Acts the laying on of hands can symbolize the giving of the Holy Spirit, the men chosen are already "full of the Spirit." Here, as in Numbers, the laying on of hands symbolizes the transfer of power and responsibility.

The chief function of the group seems to be that of administering the distribution of alms, but we will soon find two of the seven, Stephen and Philip, fulfilling the role of missionary. These seven men may have been the first deacons, although Luke does not use the specific word here. Administration is regarded as a sacred ministry, work that is guided by the Holy Spirit and by prayer.

For Further Study and Reflection

Memory Bank

1. Memorize Acts 5:29.

Research

- 1. Using a Bible dictionary and a concordance, review the ways the term "angel" is used in Luke/Acts.
- 2. With the help of a Bible dictionary and church history texts, research the rise of deacons in the New Testament Church.

Reflection

- 1. In your congregation is there an unspoken philosophy of "peace at any price?" How does your church deal with those in the congregation who cause division and strife?
- 2. Does administration in your congregation flow from the current needs of the church and its ministry? Are there committees and groups that are no longer serving the church's mission? Do administrative tasks seem as "spiritual" to you as other ministries such as preaching and teaching? Why or why not?