

The Ananias and Sapphira Incident in Acts 5:

I believe that this text is deliberately intended to have multiple trenchant meanings for the Church. So, I offer the following comments (not in any order of importance) for you to meditate on:

- This incident in Acts 5 reprises the incident with Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10). The parallels are striking. There are two victims in each narrative, each incident occurs at the outset of a new era, a fresh start, and each incident involves a transgression against God with instant death resulting. The lesson in each is, God is to be feared; He holds us accountable to our adherence to what He's revealed; our lives are to be holy, as He is holy. God is watching closely the affairs of His Body; He's not indifferent or aloof. He knows when we try to deceive Him. The Ananias and Sapphira incident also reprised the incident with Achan (Joshua 7:1). In these 3 instances, God was visibly at work, the people were personally experiencing God doing miracles, so the people were held to a higher standard.
- This incident fulfills Jesus' promise to Peter that he would be given the gift of "binding and loosing." Peter was given "keys" (Matthew 16) and he used them in Acts Chapter 2, and in Chapter 5 he fulfilled the binding and loosing prediction. [I assume that "binding and loosing" have to do with authority.] Yes, in Matthew 18, all the disciples were given the privilege of binding and loosing, but in 16, it's specifically to Peter. The incident shows how Peter supernaturally knew that the two were lying about the money and supernaturally knew there would be lethal consequences. If you dispute the "binding and loosing," at least acknowledge that Peter here had the supernatural gift of prophecy.
- This incident parallels what Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11:30b-32, ". . . a number of you have fallen asleep [died, as a judgment]." God judges believers so that they forfeit this life for ill behavior, but they don't lose eternal life. I believe that Ananias and Sapphira were believers, not phonies; they were regenerated and justified, because Peter would have known if they weren't really in the Body. They will be in heaven. The "fear of God" isn't mere "respect for God." No way! God is dangerous.
- The seriousness of this incident escapes all of us because it seems so trivial a misdeed. The Body of Christ is a new entity joined by transcendent love, the love of the Trinity. In 4:32 those followers were "one heart and one soul." (See John 17:11.) There is a union of believers with each other and with Christ, holding godly values. Needs had to be met: people have to eat, so those with resources were going to meet needs, taking responsibility for their brothers. That love, and the grace that love expresses, was on full display at the end of Chapter 4. The thinking of Barnabas (and presumably others) was transformed so that selflessly, sacrificially sharing what they had was paramount, in imitation of Christ. What Ananias and Sapphira did was violate the trust that love must involve; it violated the Christ-likeness we're to exhibit. So God immediately removed the sin from His new Body.
- To rightly understand this incident, we should probably acknowledge something not explicit in the text: they must have all agreed prior to this episode to share what they had, almost certainly even taking vows to do that. Taking vows (that included a self-curse) back then was very common, like we today get contracts notarized. The early church Fathers all said that vows to God must have been taken. So, assuming Ananias and Sapphira had taken such a vow, they defrauded God. They showed contempt for God. They evidently didn't fear God!!!
- These two lied to the church, yet Peter says that they lied to the Holy Spirit. This powerfully means that the Church and the Holy Spirit are united, are so closely identified with each other lying to one is lying to the other. Believers are intimately connected with the Godhead!! Christianity is a relationship, an intimate fellowship with God. Holiness (mortification/sanctification) is therefore not an option.
- The text is explicit: "Satan filled" Ananias. The warning to the Church is clear: Satan has the power to influence us to offend God with offenses so severe that we must forfeit life. We're to be filled with the

Holy Spirit instead (2:4) of being filled with Satan. Satan seeks to undermine or corrupt the Church so that God must punish what He loves. In this narrative, it's evident that Satan is already at work trying to corrupt the Church. Yes, Ananias still had the responsibility for what he did, because he left himself open to Satan's influence. Ananias wasn't just a hypocrite, he was committing fraud.

- In Matthew 16, Peter couldn't differentiate what was of Satan and what was the work of Christ. In Acts 5, Peter now knows. He can distinguish the two. Peter now knows what it means that Jesus is Christ: it means we who follow Him must live for Him, and not for Satan. There are 2 worlds, and they must not be mixed.
- The text says they "tested" the Spirit. This is dangerous! We try to see how far we can go in disobeying and get away with it before God must judge us. The testing here was they wanted to appear pious before others, more generous than they really were, for the praise of men. They had no concern for God and His ways. They were ungodly in a community of those who were to pursue godliness, so they had to be removed.
- This incident powerfully shows that the Holy Spirit is present and active in the midst of the Church. It's not just an abstract church doctrine. It's a reality those new believers experienced. That they were filled with fear (twice) is a forceful way of stating that God is present within His Body. The call to holiness and loyalty isn't just cheap words, it's because God is really there! The Church is to be a community totally different from anything the world knows. It's how Israel in the O.T. era could have been, but will be in the future when the New Covenant is realized.
- Luke typically gives two examples of teachings, one positive and one negative, as he does here at the end of Ch. 4 and the beginning of Ch 5. (The chapter break is misplaced; the end of Ch 4 should really go with the beginning of Ch 5.) First, an example of selfless generous giving (Barnabas), which we're to adopt as our model; then the one of selfish giving (Ananias), a model that we're to eschew. Luke also repeatedly warns against the love of money, as he does again here. How we deal with money reveals our innermost being.
- The purging of the Church of pagan values (selfishness) was precisely because the Church is to be reaching out to pagans to repent of their values and become godly. Trust in Christ enables us to live godly lives. The goal of Christianity, indeed, the goal of our salvation, is God-likeness. That glorifies God. Abraham was to reach the pagan world with the knowledge of God. Abraham was selfless (think Mt. Moriah). But Ishmael and Esau had to be excluded because they didn't live godly lives. So selfish Ananias and Sapphira had to be excluded too; they weren't loyal to God, didn't have godly values. We can't live in two different spheres at the same time (Satan's and Christ's); we can't straddle both, and we don't dare try to bring Satan's sphere into the Church.
- This incident is proleptic of the *bema* judgment. We all are accountable for how we live, like it or not. Ananias and Sapphira had their judgment already; we'll have ours in the future. We're here on probation, not to live as we please. God is serious about how we live each moment of our lives.
- Barnabas gave an *olah* offering. That was a *whole* burnt offering, nothing held back, an expression of love and devotion to God. So Ananias and Sapphira were embezzling from or cheating God! Not a good idea! How we live – whether a self-denying life, or not – reveals our love for God or lack thereof.

I hope these comments help. The story of Ananias and Sapphira is compelling and profound. We need to reflect often on it. This incident however is but one example of how deep God's Word is, and how thrilling it is to study it and see all the various ways it should impact our life. Why? So that we can make our lives count for Christ.