

Gamma

Acts 4:31 -6:1-7

Study 6 Counter attack

Q 1. Look at 4:32-37. How does v.31 lead to v.32? In what ways does the filling of the Holy Spirit and boldness (v.31) relate to the radical sharing of material possessions?

First, we must understand the basic mark of Spirit-filledness is "boldness", as 4:31 tells us. Why is that? Read Romans 8:15-16. There we are shown that the Spirit's work is to oppose a "spirit of fear". If the Holy Spirit is the opposite of fearfulness, the mark of Spirit-filledness would of course be fearlessness. But specifically how does the Holy Spirit make us fearless? Romans 8:15-16 tells us that the Spirit assures us of our being children of God. (In the same way, the Spirit assured and empowered Jesus for ministry at his baptism, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.") This then is the nature of Spirit- boldness. It is a deep assurance of the Father's love for us personally through Christ.

Second, we must see that there were not one but two forms that this Spirit- boldness took in the life of the early church.

A.First, of course is boldness in word. This we see in v.31. Despite the threat of official persecution, they "*spoke the word of God boldly*". They were not afraid of the risks involved with such speaking. Such risks included social marginalization, imprisonment, and even death.

B.Second, however is boldness in deed. This we see in v.32-36, though usually the connection between v.31 and these verses is missed. (We need to remember that when Luke wrote his material, there were no chapters or verses or headings — all such divisions were added later.) Luke clearly sees the lifestyle of radical giving and sharing of wealth as proceeding from the filling of the Holy

Spirit.

This sheds much light on how the Bible sees our attitude to possessions. A lack of generosity is not so much caused by stinginess as by fearfulness. The more the Christians were assured of God's love for them — the more spiritually secure and confident and fearless they became in that assurance — the more generous they became. They opened their homes and purses to others. This is an extremely important insight. Most people do not come close to the Biblical guideline on giving (10% of income or a "tithe" — Mal.3:8-10, Luke 11:42), but the main reason is *cowardice*, a lack of courage. The early church was not afraid of the risks involved in this kind of giving. The risks include a) a lack of a personal financial "cushion" for your own emergencies, b) the possibility of your gifts being used improperly or at least ineffectively, c) and less disposable income for your own comforts and pleasures as they arise.

So the generosity and sharing of v.32 is directly caused by the Spirit-filling of v.31. In fact, we can use v.32 as a sign of the fullness of the Spirit. If your own life is not characterized by a new and surprising (even to you!) generosity, then the assuring work of the Spirit is not very strong in you.

Note to leaders: Someone may point to the phrase "*no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared...*" (v.32) and ask if this wasn't a form of communalism or communism. (They may point it out with pleasure or with distress, depending on their politics!) Point out that in v.32 it says they did not "*call*" anything their own — this refers to an attitude, not a legal or even ecclesiastical regulation. It means that each person's heart became so generous that he or she thought of the whole church as having a claim on the personal wealth that God had given him or her. It does not mean that church members surrendered all funds into a common pool automatically. (Even v.34 says only that the apostles received major gifts "*from time to time*".) As evidence of this, cf. Acts 5:4, below, where Peter tells Ananias that he was neither obliged to sell his land nor, when he sold it, give all the proceeds to the church. Though this indicates that the early church was not any formal kind of communism or socialism, we must not minimize the fact that their love made them almost *de facto* communalists. Their life together was intimate in the extreme.

2. Based on this passage we too instructed to emulate their example and pool all our resources together in radical generosity too, is this what the passage is teaching us? If we do not pool or resources like the brethren in Acts 4 then what should we do? Do we each have our struggles in obeying God in this area can you share? Can you pray for each other for boldness in the Spirit in this area?

3. Look at Acts 5:1-12. What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira? Why was it so serious and so seriously dealt with? How can we a) fall into a similar trap, and b) avoid it?

Luke contrasts Barnabus, who sold some property and donated the proceeds (4:36) with Ananias and Sapphira, who did the same (5:1-12). On the outside, the two actions were the same, yet Barnabus is commended while Ananias' act is condemned and solemnly judged. Why the difference? At first sight, it would seem that the sin was that *"he kept back part of the money for himself"* (v.2). But Peter later on says that he was under no obligation to either sell the property nor to donate all the proceeds. *"Didn't it [the land] belong to you... and after it sold, was not the money at your disposal?"* (v.4). These are rhetorical questions. Thus Peter is saying that there were no requirements, either to sell the land nor to give all the money. All these actions were voluntary.

So what was the problem? Peter says that it was because (he says twice) *"you lied"* (v.3 and 4). In other words, they posed as if they were giving the whole price of the land. They wanted the credit and the honor in the community of being sacrificial givers — but they did not want to pay the (literal) cost for it. In short, Ananias and Sapphira's motive for giving was not God's honor but their honor, and it was not concern to benefit the poor, but concern to benefit themselves. Their sin was hypocrisy, false piety — a lack of integrity.

Why did Ananias and Sapphira die? Some people try to "get God off the hook" by proposing that they only died a natural death, from the physiological stress that a profoundly guilty conscience can create.

(Lie detectors really detect the physical stress that comes from guilt.) Ananias and Sapphira therefore may have died from strokes or heart attacks that came from the shame and guilt of public exposure. (If they were elderly or infirm, this is extremely possible.) Now this explanation is quite possible, but it does not "get God off the hook"! Even if the causes were natural, not miraculous, the fact that both husband and wife succumbed in this manner was a clear sign to the church that this was God's judgement (v.11). God's judgement is not "either/or". We do not ask: "did they die of stroke/heart attack due to stress or was it the judgement of God." Apparently, it was both.

Why was this sin seen as so serious? Remember what it was — hypocrisy. Throughout all the centuries nothing has hurt the work and witness of the church more than this. There is no more common complaint than "there are so many hypocrites in the church". G.K.Chesterton was reputed to have said, "the greatest argument against the truth of Christianity is the lives of Christians." That is absolutely true. Even the most convinced Christians are often cast into doubt by the thought: "if the gospel is true — how can so many supposed Christians be so dishonest and cruel?"

Therefore, the sin of Ananias and Sapphira is the most devastating sin to the Christian church. Murder, embezzlement, adultery, etc. are relatively less harmful to the gospel, because they are very visible, and when a person is guilty of such a sin, there is exposure and usually expulsion. But Ananias and Sapphira were guilty of spiritual pride, and were using Christianity as a way to get a reputation for being moral and spiritual "pillars". They had obviously missed the gospel's message of free grace to unworthy sinners. Thus their Christianity was really a way for them to earn their reputation and sense of worth through spiritual achievements. They would have perhaps risen up into places of leadership in the church. They would have made the church a proud, smug, legalistic place. Yes, the sin was enormously dangerous.

This may be the reason that Peter says that this was a "*lie to the Holy Spirit*" (v.3, 4). Obviously, no one consciously believes that you can deceive God, so Ananias was not making a deliberate effort to do so. But Peter is saying that to try to deceive the church *is* to try to deceive the Holy Spirit. Lying and hypocrisy means the death of the radically loving, supernatural, spiritual community which was being

so powerfully used to spread the gospel (4:32-37). To try to *use* the people of God rather than *serve* the people of God is really an effort to use and deceive the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a stab at the heart of God.

How can we fall into this same trap? Probably, the "sin under the sin" of Ananias and Sapphira was that they were using God to get a righteous reputation, rather than serving God out of gratitude for his giving them the righteousness of Christ. In other words, they were Christian Pharisees, using religion to look and feel superior to others. They "missed" the humbling gospel of grace. But that is reading a bit between the lines. The basic sin of Ananias and Sapphira was to present themselves as something they were not. They posed as spiritual giants, when they were actually struggling with pride and materialism. If they had come in to the church and gotten up and confessed their struggle with sin (even after they had done this swindle), then they would have been honest with the Holy Spirit (whose mission in the world is to convict of sin, John 16:8). The real sin of hypocrisy is a refusal to live in honest repentance. So in the church today, there is no sin that completely breaks fellowship, ruins the church's witness, and destroys your relationship with God — except the refusal to repent! (As we said above, even robbery and adultery cannot in any final way destroy our relationships with God and others — only a refusal to honestly repent can do that.) So we fall into the same trap when we allow sin to continue in our lives, but outside we tell no one, make ourselves accountable to no one, and we live and minister in the church as if there are no problems.

How can we avoid the trap? Informally, we must be accountable. We must tell some other Christians about "besetting" temptations and habitual sins and we must be honest with them and let them "hold our feet to the fire". But formally, we must let this incident remind us of the importance of church discipline. This does not teach that people who sin are to be killed! It teaches that we need our churches to hold its members accountable, and to confront them when necessary, as Peter does here. Why? Hypocrisy in the church undermines the work of the Holy Spirit enormously. But let us notice that "church discipline" does not mean that we confront every Christian about every sin. Since we are all sinners — that would leave

no time for anything else in the church. Rather, we are to confront people who are refusing to repent, for spiritual hypocrisy. Paul tells us that, when we do this, we are to do it with extreme gentleness (Gal.6:1-3). The open, strong public rebuke by Peter here in Acts 5 is something of a special case. Peter is given supernatural knowledge of Ananias' action and motive, and the two deaths are very severe. Probably this event was unusual because the entire Christian church in the world consisted of one congregation, and so God was taking special care with it!

Q 4 Have we too been guilty of hypocrisy in church? Share your experiences with such temptation and lessons we all have learnt in life. Share of episodes where hypocrisy has turned people away from the church. How does the gospel help combat hypocrisy in our lives

Q5 . Look at Acts 6:1-7 and see if you can learn a few lessons about management of church conflict from this case?

The local church is supposed to minister in deed as well as word. Verse 1 speaks of the "*daily distribution*". In the Greek, the verse literally says, "*the daily diakonia*". The word "diakonia" means "practical service", and it is the word from which we derive our word "deacon". "Diakonia" was a Greek word that meant to "wait on tables" and to feed people. We see then that the early church did not only have a *ministry of the Word* (v.2), but a ministry of service, feeding people who were hungry. We see a conflict develop over the neglect of this

The leaders immediately take action and do not let things fester to take sides or discriminate against the Greek speaking widows

The leaders delegate! The apostles see that they cannot "do it all". We have to remember that these are the apostles of Jesus — uniquely empowered and gifted. But they have to decide what to concentrate on (v.4). In the church, we cannot expect the key leaders to do it all. And we ourselves must determine our calling and concentrate on it. In a vital church, the whole Body of Christ is involved in ministry.

The church selects its leaders, not on the basis of popularity, but on the basis of spiritual maturity. These seven men were "*full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*" (v.3). The people elected the men (v.5) but the apostles ordained them (v.6). This means that in a vital church there is a "balance" between the will of the congregation and the screening of the officers of the church.

The vital church has both the problems and the wisdom to handle "diversity". The reason for the problem was that two ethnic groups inside the church were not getting along (v.1). The Greek speakers felt that they were being discriminated against. Instead of telling them to be quiet, the apostles knew that the situation took more attention and care than they could provide, and so they created a board (some would say that it was the first board of "deacons") to work for reconciliation between culturally diverse people. Scholars notice that all of the leaders' names were Greek. Thus the apostles were "sensitive" to the need for Greek-speakers to rise up in leadership, if all the ethnic groups were to feel well served. So today, if we are sharing the faith well, our churches will become culturally diverse. If minorities within the church feel they are being overlooked, we should not ask them to "be quiet", but should listen to them. Most important is to encourage members of the different groups to rise up into leadership.

Q6 . How can each one of you in the group serve and minister to the poor or other ministries within the church? If you are already serving share why you are doing so. If you are not yet serving share why you are not yet serving. How does the gospel motivate us to serve?