



# THE HORROR OF HYPOCRISY

SERIES: *THE SPREADING FLAME*

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Acts 4:32–5:11

Eighth Message

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At times even Christians fail to understand the role of the church. The church is not a building. On occasion I will say that I “need to run down to the church.” What I mean is that I need to go to the church building. There is a sign in front that says “Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino,” as if this building were the church. But it is not. We, the people, are the church. Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino meets here.

The New Testament uses the metaphor of a building to refer to the church, but it actually is referring to a temple made with living stones—not bricks and mortar but flesh and bones. We are the body of Christ. Buildings and bodies are different metaphors, but what they have in common is that they are places to live in. The glory of the church is that it is the building in which God lives and the body through which he works. The life of Christ is still being manifested in the world, no longer through a physical body, but through a corporate body, the church.

Luke begins the book of Acts with these words, “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach” (1:1). Acts is not about the actions of Christians. This book tells the story of the continuing acts of Jesus. The gospels recount what Jesus did through his own physical body. Since his ascension he accomplishes his will through the bodies of men and women who are indwelt by his life. That is the church: men and women possessed by Jesus Christ, manifesting his life in their everyday activities. The church is not like a body; we are the body of Christ, the visible expression of him. That is why, when Paul was persecuting the early Christians, he heard on the Damascus Road this question, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

In our last study we looked at the devil’s attempt to defeat the church by force, through intimidation. (That will go on to include physical violence, as we will see in the passage that we will look at next week.) But the devil was unsuccessful. Verse 31 of chapter 4 concludes, “After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” The place was shaken—which only made the believers more unshaken. Now, not only are the apostles filled with the Spirit, the whole church is so filled. Everyone was sharing this good news of God’s salvation.

At this point then, having failed to destroy the church by means of outside intimidation, the devil attempts an

inside job: he tries to ruin the fellowship of the church through deceit. Luke begins by drawing a picture of the common life of the early church. How do Spirit-filled believers act?

**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. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. [For] there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.** (Acts 4:32-35, NIV)

This passage is similar to the one at the end of chapter 2, in which Luke gives a description of how the early church functioned. I use that word deliberately. A living body doesn’t just act; it functions. A church is not a church because of what it does. A church does what it does because it is a church. A church will function as a body because it is a living organism, not a human organization. You don’t have to tell a baby how to function. All its organs and members start functioning as a natural outgrowth of life.

Luke summarizes the life of the church in two elements: genuine love for one another, and a powerful witness to the world. “Much grace was upon them all,” he writes. The fullness of the Spirit was evidenced not only by their words, but their actions. The power of their witness to the outside world lay in the practicality of their love for each other.

Notice the conjunction “for” at the beginning of verse 34. This introduces an explanation of verse 33: “And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, [indeed] abundant grace was upon them all. *For* there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales” (NASB). The NIV leaves out the word *for*, but it should be included.

Luke is saying that because they met the needs of those inside the church they were able to witness with great authority to the outside world. These Spirit-filled believers really loved each other. That isn’t surprising, because the fruit of the Spirit is love. They had a great measure of togetherness. It wasn’t just that they met together, but that they were of one heart and mind. They

were forever setting aside their own needs to serve each other. They loved one another sacrificially, to the point that they sold their possessions to meet the needs of others.

That love began with a Spirit-inspired attitude, which led to sacrificial actions. The attitude is set out in verse 32: "No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own." This does not mean that the early church gave up all private ownership of possessions. Luke is not advocating a new economic order. The important word there is "claimed." They nurtured an attitude of both heart and mind that everything they had was available for God to use in meeting the needs of others.

That is one of the marks of the Spirit's work in a life: an awareness that everything one possesses belongs to God, and a willingness, a desire, even, to share that with others. Jesus put it this way, "He who is forgiven much loves much, but he who is forgiven little loves little" (cf. Luke 7:47). When the Spirit is at work in a life there is a supernatural change from loving things and using people to loving people and using things.

This attitude led to sacrificial action to the point that, from time to time, when the need arose, these early believers sold their possessions to meet those needs. Selling their homes was a voluntary act, resulting from a changed attitude. They loved each other in visible and tangible ways, to the extent that it could be said that there wasn't an impoverished person among them. As a result of this love their witness to the outside world was very powerful.

One mark of how much we love is our willingness to part with our money and possessions. Jesus put it this way, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

In his book *Embracing the Love of God*, James Bryan Smith shares a great illustration of this kind of love. Tony Campolo was

a guest at a banquet sponsored by a Christian women's organization. During the gathering the president of the organization read an appeal letter from a missionary who needed four thousand dollars for an immediate need. After reading the heart-rending letter, the president said, "I am going to ask our guest speaker, Mr. Campolo, to lead us in prayer that God will meet the needs of this dear missionary. Brother Campolo, would you pray?"

"No," said Tony. The president was stunned. "No, I won't pray for God to meet the needs of this missionary. But I'll tell you what I will do. I'll give every dime of cash I have in my pockets and place it on the table. I'm asking each of you to do the same. If we don't have four thousand dollars, I'll pray for God to meet their needs."

"You have a point, Mr. Campolo. We should give sacrificially. We get your point," the president said.

"I am not just trying to make a point," Tony went on.

"I challenge you to give what you have now. No credit cards, no checks." He emptied his wallet. Reluctantly, three hundred people emptied their wallets and purses. The amount laid on the table was well over four thousand dollars.

"You see," Tony concluded, "we didn't need to pray that God would provide the resources. They were already there. We had to pray to let them go."<sup>1</sup>

God has already given us the resources to meet each other's physical needs. All we need do is let them go. Maybe we don't have many possessions to sell, but all of us have the ability to give. We have skills that are needed by others. People in our body need repair work done on their houses. Single parents need someone to fix their cars. The sick among us need people to help with meals, mow their lawns, or baby-sit their children. Lonely people need companionship. There are a multitude of ways we can release the resources God has given us to care for the needs of those around us.

It is a different matter if people are hungry because they don't want to work. Scripture says that if a man won't work, then neither let him eat. But there are many among us who are genuinely hurting, and we need to do something about it. Not only are the needy at stake, so is our witness to the community. In this respect I am thrilled with the work of our deacons. They have made such a significant impact in our community, caring for those in need.

These are hard economic times. We need to care for and help people who are out of work. Our bulletin today has an insert listing people in our body who are out of work. Read through that list and ask God if there is anything you can do to help. We have a need fund which is overseen by the elders, from which the deacons can take to meet people's needs. You can give money designated to that fund.

Here in these verses Luke states the practice of the early church in this wonderful spirit of generosity.

He follows now with two specific examples, one positive, the other negative. In 4:36-37 we have the positive example of Barnabas; and in 5:1-11 the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira.

**Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. (4:36-37)**

Barnabas is mentioned more than 25 times in the book of Acts. His given name was Joseph, but he was nicknamed Barnabas, an Aramaic term that means son of encouragement. He was a wonderful help to both Mark and Paul. The outstanding characteristic of his life was that he loved to encourage others. Here his encouragement takes the form of a gift.

Barnabas sells a piece of land, probably an entire farm, and lays the total amount of the sale at the feet of the apostles so that they can distribute it to the needy

saints in Jerusalem. Though it is not evident in our English translations, it is quite clear from Luke's report that he gives all of the proceeds from the sale. Barnabas was from the island of Cyprus. If this farm was on that island, it could be compared with owning acreage in Los Altos Hills. He gave a very large gift, one that was indicative of the kind of man he was. He was not required to give any of it. He does it because he wants to encourage the saints. That is the positive example of this principle.

Now the negative example.

**Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.**

**Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."**

**When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. (5:1-6)**

What a great text for a building drive! You may have had a negative experience in the past from some pastor or priest demanding that you give, and implying that God would judge you if you didn't, but that isn't what is happening here.

Ananias and Sapphira probably were present when Barnabas gave that enormous amount of money to the apostles. Barnabas wasn't seeking attention, but he probably got a lot of it at that public meeting. There were a lot of oohs and aahs when he gave the proceeds from the sale of his land. Ananias deeply admired Barnabas' generosity and wanted to follow suit. But he had mixed motives. He may have wanted to be considered a generous man. Maybe he wanted the recognition of the leadership.

Later that evening, as they were returning home, Ananias and Sapphira decided to try and emulate the generous actions of Barnabas by selling a piece of property. We assume there was prior agreement made to give the whole amount. Luke says in verse 2 that Ananias "kept back" ("misappropriated") part of the money. The only other place in the NT where that word is used it is translated "steal." But when the money was in their hands they couldn't live up to their intention. They thought about what they could do with it. "Nobody knows how much we made on the property," they surmised. "Why don't we just keep \$10,000? We'll simply act as if we were giving the whole amount."

So they brought their offering to the meeting. The organ had just finished playing "I Surrender All," and Ananias gave the money to the apostles in the same way as Barnabas. Everyone oohed and aahed—except Peter. As an apostle, he apparently received direct revelation that Ananias was lying. He charged Ananias that Satan had motivated him to do what he had done.

Peter sees this as an attack on the unity, integrity and health of the church. Satan is assaulting the church not only from the outside, as we saw in chapters 3-4 through the religious establishment, but now he is beginning to attack internally, through members of the body of Christ.

Hearing this, Ananias fell down and died. Some young men step forward and take his body away. Meanwhile, Sapphira is at home, possibly fixing a meal. Her husband is already in the grave when she arrives, oblivious to everything that had happened

**About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"**

**"Yes," she said, "that is the price."**

**Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."**

**At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. (5:7-11)**

Peter asks her, "Did you agree to sell the property for such and such a price?" and she replies, "Yes, that was the price." The apostle gives her an opportunity to repent. If she had broken down and confessed, I believe she would have been spared. But no. She said, "Yes, we sold it for that price." And immediately she collapsed and died. Luke concludes, in an understatement, "great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things."

This couple's sin wasn't greed or selfishness. No one was forced to sell property; it was a purely voluntary thing. Nor was anyone forced to give all the profits from a sale. The issue here was deceit and hypocrisy. As John Stott puts it: "They wanted the credit and the prestige for sacrificial generosity, without the inconvenience of it. So, in order to gain a reputation to which they had no right, they told a brazen lie. Their motive in giving was not to relieve the poor, but to fatten their own ego."<sup>2</sup> They wanted to look righteous, not be righteous.

One could well ask what was so wrong about what they did. After all, people have lied before. Why such an immediate and harsh judgment? At times in history God underscores the magnitude of certain sins. This was a pivotal time in the church. Richard Longenecker comments: "the way Ananias and Sapphira attempted

to reach their goals was so diametrically opposed to the whole thrust of the gospel that to allow it to go unchallenged would have set the entire mission of the church off course.”<sup>3</sup>

A similar incident occurred in the case of Achan as the children of Israel prepared for a new era in the Promised Land. In fact, these two stories parallel one another. F. F. Bruce comments: “The story of Ananias is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In both narratives an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God.”<sup>4</sup> Luke may have had the story of Achan in mind as he wrote. The word he uses for “kept back” is the same term used in Joshua for Achan “keeping back” or stealing money and clothing after the destruction of Jericho.

At this important time in the history of the church God is emphasizing that the destruction caused by deceit is clearly more far reaching than we think. After this incident there were others who were hypocritical, and they didn’t drop dead. But God is simply making a point. He is protecting his infant church. If hypocrisy is not dealt with, it will destroy the church.

Hypocrisy is a serious sin. But it comes to us so naturally. We are deceivers by nature. It is one of Satan’s favorite ways of intruding into the life of the church and destroying the body. He is an enemy. He is a liar and a murderer. He brought about the fall by convincing man to believe his lies. And he will destroy anyone he can through hypocrisy.

Jesus’ harshest words were on this subject. He told his disciples, “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (Luke 12:1). Hypocrisy is play-acting, pretending, wanting to look righteous when we know we aren’t. Jesus said, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on

the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness” (Matt 23:27-28).

Hypocrisy is play-acting, pretending, wanting to look righteous when we know we aren’t. Hypocrites have an outward façade of righteousness, but no internal reality. They can’t be ambassadors of grace because they haven’t received grace. They don’t want to look at their own deep needs.

As we come to the Table of the Lord, this is a good time for self-examination. All of us are sinners. We all want to look good. But we need to be honest. Sin has great power in the dark, but it loses its power in the light. That is why Peter asked Sapphira, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?” He wanted her to own up, to be honest, so she could be cleansed and healed. But she would not.

May God grant us the grace to shun hypocrisy, and to be honest and genuine in our love for another.

*Love from the center of who you are; don’t fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply.* (Rom 12:9-10, *The Message*)

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1. James Bryan Smith, *Embracing the Love of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 154-155.
2. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 109-110.
3. Richard N. Longenecker, “Acts,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 314.
4. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 102.