

## The Power of Integrity in the Church: Lessons from Acts 5

In the early days of the Christian church, a spirit of generosity and unity swept through the community of believers. The book of Acts paints a beautiful picture of people selling their possessions and sharing everything they had with one another. This wasn't just a fleeting moment of charity; it was a profound expression of their faith and commitment to the body of Christ.

Among those who participated in this communal sharing was a man named Barnabas, who would later become a significant figure in the early church. He sold a piece of land and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet, demonstrating his dedication to the cause of Christ and the welfare of his fellow believers.

However, amidst this atmosphere of selflessness and unity, a dark cloud emerged. A couple named Ananias and Sapphira also decided to sell some property and contribute to the church. But unlike Barnabas and others, they harbored deceit in their hearts. They conspired to keep back a portion of the proceeds while presenting themselves as having given the full amount.

This may seem like a small transgression in the grand scheme of things. After all, wasn't it their money to do with as they pleased? But the gravity of their actions becomes clear when we consider the words of the apostle Peter: "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land?" (Acts 5:3)

Peter's piercing question reveals a profound truth: when we act deceitfully towards the church, we are not merely lying to people - we are lying to God Himself. The church is not just a human institution; it is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ on earth. Our actions towards the church, whether positive or negative, are actions towards God.

The consequences for Ananias and Sapphira were swift and severe. Both were struck dead upon being confronted with their deception. This shocking turn of events serves as a stark reminder of the seriousness with which God views integrity within His church.

But why such a harsh judgment? To understand this, we must recognize the pivotal moment in which this occurred. The early church was in its infancy, and God was establishing a new covenant with His people. Just as He had done with Achan in the book of Joshua, God was making it clear that sin and deception have no place among His people.

The story of Achan bears striking similarities. After the Israelites' victory at Jericho, they faced an unexpected defeat at the small city of Ai. The reason? Hidden sin in the camp. Achan had secretly kept some of the spoils from Jericho, directly disobeying God's command. Until this sin was exposed and dealt with, the entire community suffered the consequences.

These accounts remind us of a crucial truth: the health and effectiveness of the church are intrinsically linked to the integrity of its members. When we allow deceit, pride, or divisiveness to take root in our hearts, we become conduits for Satan's work within the body of Christ.

The Apostle Paul warns us not to be ignorant of the devil's schemes. Satan is always looking for an opportunity to infiltrate the church, and he often does so through the flesh of its members. This is why we are called to "test the spirits" and to invite the Holy Spirit to examine our motives and intentions.

It's a sobering reality that throughout history, the church has been marred by scandals involving money, sexual misconduct, and the exploitation of trust. These incidents cause immeasurable damage, not just to the individuals directly involved, but to the witness of the church as a whole.

Many have suffered spiritual harm at the hands of those pretending to be something they're not within the church.

Jesus himself spoke about the severity of causing others to stumble in their faith: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea." (Mark 9:42) These are strong words that underscore the importance of our actions and their impact on others' faith.

So how do we guard against becoming instruments of Satan within the church? The answer lies in drawing close to Christ and yielding to the Holy Spirit. Obedience to God shuts down the work of the enemy, for Satan can only work through the disobedient.

We must also cultivate a deep love for the church. To love Christ is to love and cherish His bride. The apostle John writes, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us." (1 John 4:11-12)

This love for the church and for our fellow believers should manifest in tangible ways. Just as the early Christians shared their possessions and cared for one another's needs, we too are called to live out our faith in practical acts of love and service.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of integrity in the body of Christ. It challenges us to examine our own hearts and motives. Are we fully committed to Christ and His church? Are we living lives of transparency and truth? Or are we, like Ananias and Sapphira, holding something back?

Let us be inspired by the example of Barnabas and countless others who have given sacrificially for the sake of the gospel. May we be people who bring unity, truth, and love into the church, rather than division, deception, or pride.

As we reflect on these truths, let's invite the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and reveal any areas where we may be falling short. Let's commit to being people of integrity, who love the church and seek its welfare above our own. For in doing so, we not only honor God but also participate in His ongoing work of building and strengthening His church on earth.