

SERIOUS STEWARDSHIP

A Second Look at the Ananias and Sapphira Narrative

M. Thomas Norwood, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church, Greenville, Mississippi

The powerful yet perplexing account of Ananias and Sapphira evokes a variety of responses from preachers. Some follow the lead of lectionary makers throughout the history of the church and ignore the passage; others hide behind the "this-passage-is-a-creation-of-the-early-church-and-thus-is-not-relevant-or-binding-for-me" smokescreen. At the other end of the theological spectrum, biblical literalists use its "you'd-better-give-or-else" message to scare additional dollars into church coffers. However, in spite of the embarrassment and misuse it precipitates, this text deserves a second look, for it challenges Christians to re-examine their commitment to the community of faith and to serious stewardship.

I

In this section of Acts, Luke continues his straight-forward description of the early church in Jerusalem. He does not attempt to cover up the Ananias and Sapphira incident, nor does he apologize for its presence in his account. Rather, he uses this tradition in his narrative for theological purposes.

There are many theories regarding the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. Some, like William Barclay, feel that the deaths were natural ones, i.e., heart failure induced by the shock of having their sins discovered. Others hold that this narrative is a legend. Ananias and Sapphira (so the argument runs) were the first Christians to die. Their deaths were such a shock to the rest of the Christian community (who thought that death had been abolished by the resurrection of Christ) that the survivors created this story, which attributed the deaths to undetected sin. Neither of these theories satisfactorily explains the deaths, but both provide clues for the interpretive task. The "natural death" explanation reveals how seriously the early church viewed past-baptismal sin (cf. Hebrews 10:26). The other argument rightly recognizes that Luke's purpose is more literary/theological than historical. Thus, to concentrate on the narrow issue of the historicity of the tradition reflected in this passage is to miss Luke's purpose entirely.

But what exactly is Luke's purpose? Any attempt to answer that question must begin with a literary analysis of the text in context. In his recently published dissertation, Luke T. Johnson suggests that a discernible literary pattern dominates Luke-Acts. Luke, says Johnson, expands the prophecy/fulfillment motif so that the words of the Old Testament prophets are fulfilled not only in the events of Jesus' life, but also in the events of the early church's life.⁽¹⁾ The Jerusalem narrative of Acts, of which this text is a part, functions to demonstrate that 1) there was indeed a believing community within historic Israel to whom God's blessing came, 2) that the twelve were the nucleus of this newly founded community, and 3) that Paul and other missionaries remained under the authority of the Twelve.⁽²⁾

Johnson also argues that Luke uses possessions to highlight several theological concerns. In fact, these concerns become symbolic of life in the Christian community. First of all, Luke believes that the sharing of all possessions preserves the spiritual unity of the community. In holding back possessions, Ananias and Sapphira undermine this essential unity. Secondly, the laying of the possessions at the feet of the apostles is more than an act of material generosity; it is an act of self-dedication. As the members of the community turn over their material wealth, they turn over their own lives to the authority of the Twelve. In excluding their lives from apostolic authority, Ananias and Sapphira exclude themselves from the community of faith. Finally, by mentioning Barnabas as the one who brought forth his possessions (thereby submitting to the authority of the community leaders), Luke extends the authority of the Twelve to the Gentile community.(3)

It is clear that the Ananias and Sapphira narrative serves mainly as a "negative foil" in Luke's literary design. Luke does, however, allow this text to make some positive statements about the life under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Writing to a community of Gentile Christians about 87 A.D., he attempts to convince them that the church is in an extended period of involvement with its culture. He also tells them that the church of which they are a part has a significant role to play in the overall scheme of salvation history. Luke wants his readers to think through the past and examine exactly how they should relate to God and to their immediate culture. This thought process would necessarily include an examination of their relationship to the other members of the community. In other words, the dramatic account of Ananias and Sapphira is introduced at this point so that Luke can engage in a theological discussion with his community about the nature of God, the nature of Sin, and the nature of the church.

First of all, Luke makes it clear that God's work in their time will be done through the power of the Holy Spirit. To tempt the Spirit is to tempt God; to lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God. Luke's emphasis is on the reality of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian community and the serious implications of that fact. Just as Peter is God's agent of life in the healing of the lame man (Acts 3:1-10), so also he is God's agent of death in this situation.

The second point Luke makes is that sin cannot be thought of only in terms of individual transgressions; it has a corporate dimension as well. To Luke, this was clearly shown in the sin of Achan in the Old Testament (Joshua 7) (his Bible), and he makes the lesson just as clear in this narrative. From his viewpoint (put in the words of Peter), the sin of Ananias was not only an individual act of deception against his community, but was also a communal deception against the Spirit. In other words:

Ananias, in the effort to gain a reputation for greater generosity than he deserved, tried to deceive the believing community, but in trying to deceive the community, he was really deceiving the Holy Spirit, whose life-giving power had created the community and maintained it in being. So real was the apostles' appreciation of the presence and authority of the Spirit in their midst. A lie told to Peter as a private man would have been relatively venial, but this--whether Ananias knew it or not--was a lie told to God, something suggested by none other than the great adversary of God and man.(4)

Finally, Luke has a powerful message regarding the nature of the church, especially the early church in which this story is set. Luke shows the early church as is, warts and all. His honest portrayal allows his readers to have a more realistic picture of the church as an institution. He implores his readers not to wear sackcloth and ashes every time a sin is exposed, but to recognize the reality of sin and its consequences for the community of faith. More importantly, Luke asks them to re-examine their commitment to the community, especially in regards to the stewardship of their possessions. Ananias wanted to become a prominent, respected member of the community without making the necessary sacrifices. In including this tradition in his narrative, Luke forces his community to wrestle with the ultimate implications of joining the Christian community. Are they like Barnabas, offering to share their surpluses with others; or are they like Ananias and Sapphira, holding something back because of the cost? To join this community is to become accountable to God not only for the conduct of their own lives, but also for the interests of the larger community.

II

Sermons are not theoretical treatises constructed in a vacuum, but (hopefully) have a specific Sitz im Leben. What is the particular cultural context of stewardship preaching today? Two issues merit special attention.

The first of these is the energy crisis. The harsh realities of energy addiction confront Americans in every socio-economic strata. The economy has been disrupted, the fragile political consensus undermined, the traditional patterns of life threatened. Most Christians are anxious about the current state of affairs; some are downright depressed about the prospects for the future. Such a situation challenges the talents of preachers. Pastors certainly must address this loss of hope. At the same time, they have a prophetic responsibility to remind those in the pews that Americans make up 6% of the world's population and yet consume 40% of its goods and resources. Howard Rice, recently elected moderator of the UPCUSA, illuminates the crux of the issue in these words:

We need to take some more-than-symbolic actions to reduce our dependence on luxuries, reduce our traveling, endless meetings, consumption of energy, and in some way begin to act as the people of God in a world of limited resources and energy. Our standard of living isn't possible any more. The Gospel will not permit us to live this way any more.(5)

The other related cultural issue is what Bruce Robertson has termed the "pathological self-preoccupation" of Americans. The evidence for such a label abounds. Self-assertion books proliferate and dominate the best-seller lists. The "I've got mine, you get yours" message is drummed into the national consciousness by the media. On a recent Johnny Carson show, the author of one of the best-selling self-help books related with pride an incident in a bakery when an elderly woman began to pour out her troubles to him. He cut her off in mid-sentence: "Lady, you must have me confused with someone who cares about you and wants to hear about your problems." Such attitudes of brazen selfishness are finding acceptance in this society; the threat of increasingly secularized communities of faith is very real.

Another effect of the disease of self-interest is the growing tendency to define meaning in life in economic terms: position, salary, size of house, type and number of cars. The church has, for the most part, remained silent as the culture defined a person's "net worth" according to the "financial assets minus liabilities" formula. It is now reaping the harvest of years of giving an inordinate amount of attention to the economic dimension of life while neglecting the spiritual dimension. This, too, is an "opening" for sermons.

At the heart of the problem of rampant narcissism is the neglect of community relationships. Rugged individualism, ingrained in the American character from its origins, is reasserting itself. Traditional cultural and moral sanctions which once encouraged community consciousness no longer hold sway. Volunteer work is frowned upon as demeaning. In the religious sphere, the phrase "I have been born again" has become the entry fee into much of American Christendom. In allowing such individualistic piety to remain unchallenged, preachers have undermined the community of faith. Church members need to be reminded again and again that they are members of the Christian community by virtue of their acceptance of the lordship of Christ. Certainly, one of the goals of preaching is to enable those in the pew to understand the corporate dimension of the faith, to view life together as something to be celebrated, not simply endured.

The energy crisis is real. Rampant self-interest is a fact of life. Despair about the present and anxiety about the future are part and parcel of life in twentieth century America. How then do preachers constructively apply the exegesis of the passage to the exegesis of the culture?

III

The Ananias and Sapphira narrative speaks specifically to the above concerns, especially in the context of stewardship emphasis. First of all, the passage encourages a broader perspective on stewardship. A good number of Christians confuse stewardship with the annual fund-raising efforts. The Greek word for stewardship, OIKONOMIA, combines the noun meaning "house" or "household" with the verb meaning "to distribute." The idea behind the word stewardship, then, is the management of the resources of a family, not only of the biological family but of the middle-eastern extended family home.⁽⁶⁾ Just as President Carter, in his televised energy speech last Summer, noted that the crisis in America is far deeper than the debate over the decontrol of the price of oil, so Luke argues that stewardship is more than the payment of a pledge.

This pericope illustrates Luke's point. Ananias and Sapphira thought that their generosity would be rewarded by increased standing in the community. But they radically misunderstood the nature of stewardship. The gift of possessions, while meeting the immediate needs of the community members, nevertheless symbolized the far greater commitment of self to God and others. Ananias wanted to write a check; God wanted the check writer.

Secondly, this passage clearly illuminates the corporate dimension of the Christian faith. A community's use of its possessions gives it its self-identity. In other words, a community's witness is largely determined by the use to which it puts its resources. If churches insist upon being islands of affluence in a sea of poverty, then their proclamation of the Gospel will be hollow and have no integrity. If, on the other hand, the communities of Christ demonstrate through their stewardship of possessions that they are committed to serving the needs of the larger human

community, then its witness will be authentic.

Finally, this narrative proclaims that stewardship is serious. It is far more than a dollar dropped in the collection plate, even more than a successful Every Member Canvass. Stewardship is the community's response to the grace of God. It is the acknowledgement that God continues to call out persons and bind them together in service in his name.

IV

There are many ways to preach this passage. Preachers can focus on the difference between Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira, on the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian community, or, by comparing Ananias with Achan, on the individual in relationship to the community. A first-person monologue in which the preacher (as Luke) tries to explain his theological concerns to his community, followed by an evaluation of how well he succeeded, is another possibility.

One of the biggest problems that the church has faced in its history has been the tendency to view the New Testament, especially the troublesome parts, as only relevant for the first century of the world. The result is that biblical principles are not always applied to situations which are not "biblical" in nature (dehumanizing technology, the energy crisis, etc.). But Christians must realize that they can see themselves in the Bible, and thus, can gain self-understanding from the Scriptures. So it is with this passage. Luke's message is aimed at a specific Gentile audience, but it speaks just as clearly to the communities of faith in the twentieth century. It deserves a second look.

(1) Johnson, Luke T., The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts. SBL Dissertation Series 39. (Missoula: Scholar's Press, 1977), p. 15.

(2) Ibid., p. 172.

(3) Ibid., p. 310.

(4) Bruce, F. F., The Book of Acts, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 113.

(5) Quoted in The Presbyterian Outlook, July 9, 1979.

(6) Rooy, Sidney, "The Stewardship of Gifts in the Universal Church" in The Reformed Journal 29:2 (Feb. 79), p. 16.