

# Spirituality and Ecumenism

(3 of 9)



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**Justo.** Acts 5:1-11

*But a man named Ananias with his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have lied not to human beings but to God." When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.*

*After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said "Yes, for so much." But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Hark, the feet of those that have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things.*

**Catherine.** This is a very strange account. Rarely has it found a significant place in the lectionary.

It probably continues to make congregations fearful—or perhaps it is heard with more amusement than fear in our day. What exactly is going on here? The details need to be looked at, not just the peculiar outcome.

Though there is a chapter break between the passage we read yesterday, concerning the sharing of goods in the early church, and this one, they need to be seen together. As chapter four ends, we have been given the example of Barnabas who sold a field and gave the money to

the apostles for use in meeting the needs of the community. Immediately after that comes this account of the couple, Ananias and Sapphira. The chapter even begins with a conjunction: *de*, meaning "and" or "but."

After Barnabas's generous gesture, evidently this couple decided they wished to do the same kind of thing. At least, they wanted the response from the congregation. They decided to sell a field. Rather than give the entire sum to the Apostles, they agreed to give only part of it. Evidently, however, they presented it to the congregation giving the impression that they had sold a field and now were donating all of the proceeds to the church—even as Barnabas had done.

Perhaps Peter was ready for such an event, or at least afraid something like this might happen. In the midst of a still-sinful community, there is a real problem with generosity. The magnanimous gift given in great love can cause a lot of problems. It makes other people feel guilty or jealousy—or both. Guilt or jealousy are not helpful emotions in the midst of any community, but in a small one, they can do great damage. Think of the account—in all four gospels—of the woman with the alabaster jar. Here was a gift like Barnabas's—given to Jesus rather than the whole community. What was the result? Every account points out that somebody was unhappy with it. Either Judas, or the disciples, Pharisees—someone complained that what she had done was inappropriate or stupid. Jesus defended her actions against the feelings of the community.

The loving act, the generous act, of another makes us think of our own lack of these virtues.

Perhaps we may decide, with generosity, to do the same thing, only to find our resolve weakening when it comes time to carry out our intent. We probably respond in anger to the one who has made us conscious of how unloving or ungenerous we are. We might question their motives or in some other way try to take away from the goodness of what they had done. Evidently, the Jerusalem community did not react in those ways to Barnabas. But we can see from Ananias and Sapphira that there was some more hidden negative response.

There may be times when our awareness of the community's dislike of the generous person may inhibit the good that we might otherwise do. We don't want to become the focus of such anger or jealousy. But even more often, we may be part of the environment that inhibits others. These are powerful emotions and active in most closely knit groups. If Peter were astute as the leader of the community—which he evidently was—he might well have been suspicious of the imitations of Barnabas that Ananias and Sapphira presented.

**Justo.** Peter's response makes several things clear about the voluntary character of contributions to the church. No one was obliged to sell property. It was an act of love and sharing, and not a command. Furthermore, it was quite legitimate to sell something and give only part of the income to the church. All was not required. Again, it was a voluntary act and not a commandment. Therefore, what this couple did was pretend they were giving the whole

amount but, in actuality, giving only part. They wanted credit for more generosity than they really had.

What was their sin? It was not lack of generosity. It was not simply giving only part of the money and keeping the rest. It was not failure to meet the requirements of financial commitment this early congregation demanded. Peter twice says to Ananias that the sin was in lying about the amount. The sin is the lie. Furthermore, the problem with the lie was that it showed something about how Ananias and Sapphira understood the church. They assumed that it was a fairly inconsequential matter to lie to the church: After all, it was simply a gathering of people. You don't have to tell everyone about your actions.

What Peter pointed out was that lying to the church was a very serious matter—because one can never simply lie to the human membership of the church. Such membership always includes more than the human: The Holy Spirit is what holds the church together. To lie to the church is to lie to God. And lying to God is no small matter. Peter says: "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" To lie to the Holy Spirit—to take part in the anger and jealousy that can destroy the community of the Spirit—that is not simply a human action. It is demonic—it pits the powers of evil against the power of God. Ananias had become an instrument of evil beyond his own power when he gave place to the jealousy or anger that Barnabas had raised in him.

**Catherine.** Before we go on to discuss the significance of this relationship of the Holy Spirit and the Church—and what this has to say about the contemporary ecumenical life of the church, let us look at a few more of the details of this passage.

**Justo.** After the dealing with Ananias—and his death—his wife came in. (Strangely, her husband had apparently been buried without her even knowing of his death.) Peter questioned her about the same matter. There was collusion. Both were equally guilty. There was no statement that since she is a woman, she could not be held accountable. An equality in guilt bespeaks an equality in responsibility in matters relating to the Holy Spirit. We each relate directly—there is no hiding behind our lack of social status. She knew of the arrangement. She also lied about it. Her attitude toward the church was the same as her husband's, and the consequences were the same.

**Catherine.** Furthermore, we should not assume the passage is saying more than it does. We are not told about the ultimate fate of the couple. Were they damned? Were they still among the redeemed, though suffering great chastisement? The passage does not deal with such issues. That is not its concern. It is reminding the young church that one ought not to deal lightly with the gathering of the faithful, for in its midst is God. To trifle with the church is to trifle with God. No wonder fear came upon the whole church, even later Christians far from Jerusalem who heard about these things.

**Justo.** What would have happened if (if we could try rewriting Scripture for a moment) after the church had received Barnabas's gift, Ananias or Sapphira had said: "My brothers and sisters, we feel a little jealous about the response everyone is giving to Barnabas. We wish we could do something like that, but we know what we want is the response—it would not be a gift out of love to others as Barnabas's gift is. Pray for us, for we know that is not the way we should feel." They might have found that they had a lot of company within the congregation. Or if they had sold the field and come to Peter and said: "We sold the field for eight hundred dollars, and we would like to give four hundred to meet the needs of the congregation. We're not quite at the point of trusting all of our lives to this group of people, but we would like to make a start in that direction." One of these would probably have been a very honest statement (we cannot tell the exact motivation for their action). Whatever it had been, it would have strengthened the congregation. Surely no condemnation, and considerable spiritual growth, would have occurred for them and for the whole church. In doing what they did, however, they lost the opportunity for growth that might otherwise have been there.

They did not trust the community with what they were really experiencing. Perhaps they did not even acknowledge it to themselves. Therefore, the community could not help them. The Apostles' Creed moves from belief in the Holy Spirit to the acknowledgement of the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, and the forgiveness of sins. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit, thereby negating the reality of the church and damaging the bonds that held together the communion of saints. Had they confessed the sin, forgiveness would have brought

in its wake the renewal of the bonds of the community, the reality of the church, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Catherine.** We need the Christian community in order to cultivate the kind of openness and honesty that growth in faithfulness demands. We need the community in order to try out the virtues we are called to develop and to see the vices we still possess. Dishonesty cuts the process short. It prevents growth. It inhibits the work of the Spirit in us and in others.

So often we think of spirituality as the quality of an individual before God. The corporate dimension, the relation of the individual to others in the community of the Holy Spirit, is lost from view. In early monasticism—in the work of both St. Basil and St. Benedict—the role of the community in helping each one attain holiness was significant. Without others who can remind me of my shortcomings, without others who need my forgiveness even as I need theirs, how would real progress toward sanctification occur? God has given us a great gift in giving us the church, but if we act as though it is simply another human organization, it ceases to function as the church for us.

In our present culture, if people were struck dead for lying to the church, membership would be small indeed. The church seems to be the place where pretenses are most expected—where revealing where we really are would not be acceptable. It is almost as though we were encouraged not to be honest. Perhaps this is an exaggeration. Perhaps there are situations in

which the church is the place of radical honesty. But in a culture that is accustomed to substituting appearances for substance, where PR is the operating mode for most everything, where individualism and privacy are highly valued beyond community and intimacy, the church does not seem to be immune to these characteristics.

**Justo.** BREAK INTO GROUPS OF FOUR OR FIVE (a bit larger than before).

Discuss briefly: What are Christians least likely to be truthful about in a congregation? How does this affect congregational life? What issues are churches least likely to be honest about between each other—especially across denominational lines? How does it affect ecumenical relationships? What steps could be taken to change this?

**Justo.** It may not be entirely fair to think that the early church simply was more honest. We need to realize that it probably was more difficult not to be. When Christians are a small group in the midst of a culture that is not supportive—and may be openly hostile—then they must depend on each other for emotional as well as social support. Under those circumstances, they meet daily, not once a week. They spend hours together, not simply one hour a week. Lives are more open to each other, whether they wish it or not. It is much harder to be secretive in such a situation.

When the Roman Empire became supportive of the church, then the community of faith needed to gather only for the purposes of public worship. Other emotional and social needs

were met by groups other than the church. In fact, the church could be one of the places where people were least known rather than best known.

We have inherited much of our understanding of church life from precisely that situation. In the West, perhaps it was not all that noticeable in the long centuries of the Middle Ages when cities had disappeared, and life was largely rural. The rural community with its church was, by necessity, a fairly intimate association, simply by the nature of the social fabric.

But we are no longer in that kind of setting. Industrialization, urbanization, and secularization have all affected us. It is not only that the church has ceased to be an intimate community in which we are encouraged to be honest: There is almost nowhere else in our society that such intimacy exists.

**Catherine.** Lesslie Newbigin wrote, shortly after he became a bishop in the church in South India:

I believe that the reason why quarrels, and the settling of quarrels, play such a large part in the life of the Church here is that the whole structure of society is such that people are much more fully involved in each of their social relationships than is the case in the Western type of multiple society. In the typical Western city, each individual is involved in an immense number of relationships, each of which only engages a very small part of his total personality. . . The Church is only one among the great variety of societies among which he can choose the one that suits his taste. The position in an ordinary Indian village or small town is completely different. The whole of a man's life—his work, his recreation and his religion—is lived in relation to the same set of people. Whichever way he turns, he meets the same people. . . He cannot replace them with others. Moreover, in the Church he is involved in a society

which insists on including men and women of all castes, and on demanding that the natural motive of the family solidarity shall be subordinated to the interests of the Church as a whole. It is not really surprising that quarrels are frequent and bitter, or that they are generally eventually healed. They are essentially quarrels between people who know that they cannot finally repudiate one another. (*That All May Be One*, pp. 109-110).

In the midst of our culture, it is not a simple matter to create a climate in which people in the church know each other well enough that honesty is supported rather than discouraged. Nor is the fracturing of the church into so many different denominations a help. Even other Christians who know us may well be part of a different Christian congregation, so our life as Christians and our life in the wider society are still kept separate, even when associates are also Christian.

It cannot be that the Church only functions well in a non-industrial society. Surely it must be possible to be the church in the sort of world in which we live. However, it may be that it requires a certain challenging of assumptions basic to our society in order to be that church. Newbigin speaks from the setting of a mission church—one that cannot take for granted the support of the fabric of the wider society. More and more churches around the world are realizing that, in many respects, the church is in a mission situation, in societies that have been predominantly Christian for centuries. Many of the contemporary innovations in church life—from base communities in Latin America to neighborhood groups within a suburban large parish—are attempts to create groups in which honesty is encouraged, in which the church as the community of the Holy Spirit can be experienced.

Our disunity is a great impediment. What happens when Christians who know each other in the society, who may work with each other, who are friends or even family, then are part of separate communities of faith? It is difficult enough, in an industrial society, to strengthen the links that hold Christians together without dividing them by denominational lines. Unity may be necessary, not only for mission to the world but also for a mission of renewal within the church itself.

**Justo.** We began with the text about Ananias and Sapphira. They seemed to have been an exception in that early Jerusalem community. Yet their lack of understanding of what the church really was probably is a common characteristic today. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote—in *The Cost of Discipleship*--that we often seek to find an ideal church and downgrade all others that are not perfect as not really the church, and therefore not worthy of being taken seriously by us. It is difficult for us to believe that the gathering of ordinary human beings, with the faults and vices that human beings possess, really is the church. Surely the Jerusalem church contained ordinary human beings—not all perfect except for this unhappy couple. It was not their sinfulness that Peter condemned, it was their inability to see the real church, the Body of Christ, the community of the Holy Spirit, in the gathering of the others. It had ceased to be the church as far as they were concerned.

But it had not ceased to be the church as far as God was concerned. The Holy Spirit continued to dwell in it. Their lie was therefore to the Spirit. God's faithfulness to the church can be a

problem for Christians who do not see the church in the same group of people. Perhaps that is why the words about the church are in the creeds: I believe in the holy catholic church; I believe in the one, holy catholic and apostolic church. Belief in the church, belief that these people are really the church, may always be an act of faith.

