

## Acts 4:32-5:11 (Part II)

### Introduction

We've seen how so far, in the first five chapters of Acts, Luke has been continuously emphasizing the eschatological reality of a New Covenant Israel. We've seen this in the necessity of a replacement for Judas to bring the number of the apostles back to twelve (cf. the twelve tribes of Israel; 1:15-26). We've seen this in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on "all flesh" (on the entire New Covenant community) in fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (2:16-18; cf. Joel 2:28-29). We've seen this in Luke's regular emphasis on a visible and definable group of repentant, baptized believers that can be counted and numbered (1:15; 2:41, 47; 4:4). We've seen this in Luke's regular emphasis on the unity and oneness and togetherness of those who had believed in Jesus as the Messiah (1:14; 2:1, 46; 4:24, 32; 5:12). We've seen this in Peter's proclamation that Jesus is the eschatological prophet "like Moses," and that, as Moses said, "every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be cut off from among the people [cut off from among the covenant people (the New Covenant Israel)]" (3:22-23; cf. Deut. 18:15, 18-19 & Lev. 23:29). We've seen this in Luke's two summary descriptions of the eschatological realities of life in the New Israel—where everything was held in common and "there was not a needy person among them" (4:32-35 & 2:43-47; cf. Deut. 15:4). We've seen this in Luke's contrast between "*their* [the Jews'] rulers and elders and scribes" and "*their* [the apostles'] *own* people (4:5 & 4:23), as well as in Luke's depiction of the leadership of the new Israel on trial before the leadership of the old Israel (4:1-22). We've seen this in Luke's reference to this New Covenant community as "the multitude [*plethos*] of those who believed" (4:32; cf. 5:14; 6:1-2, 5, 7; 9:31; 15:30) in fulfillment of God's promise of a multitude of seed to Abraham, the man of faith (Gen. 17:1-4, 22:7; 26:4, 24; 32:12; 35:11; Exod. 1:6-10). And finally, as of last week, we've seen this in Luke's first ever reference to this New Covenant community as the assembly/*ekklesia* ("church"), the fulfillment of the Old Covenant assembly/*ekklesia* ("church"). Jesus said to Peter:

- Matthew 16:18 — "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My *ekklesia*/assembly ["church"]; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it."

We saw last week that what's new here is not the word, *ekklesia*, or even the concept of "the *ekklesia*." What's new is Jesus' expression, "**My** *ekklesia*/assembly [**My** church]." What Jesus is going to build is His own Messianic assembly ("church"), which will be the fulfillment of the Old Covenant assembly ("church"). "You are Peter [*petros*], and upon this rock [*petra*] [upon you as one of the *twelve* apostles (cf. the *twelve* tribes of Israel)] I will build My assembly ["church"]..."

Only now are we ready to understand the Ananias and Sapphira story that's preceded with Luke's reference to "the multitude [*plethos*] of those who believed" (4:32; cf. 5:14) and that ends with Luke's first reference to the assembly [*ekklesia*]" (5:11).

**I. Acts 4:36-37** — Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a field, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

We'll revisit these verses later in Acts. For right now, Luke introduces Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement, as a positive foil for the negative example that he gives next.

**II. Acts 5:1–2** — But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge. And bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet.

Does that sound too bad? It's certainly not good, is it? But is it really that bad? The Greek word for "kept back" (*nosphizo*) means "to misappropriate for oneself."<sup>\*</sup> In other words, it means not just to put something aside or keep something for oneself, but to *dishonestly* put aside or keep something for oneself—to pilfer, steal, embezzle. Paul writes to Titus:

➤ **Titus 2:9–10 (2 Macc. 4:32)** — Urge slaves to be subject to their own masters in everything... not **pilfering** [*nosphizo*; not dishonestly appropriating his master's goods for himself], but demonstrating all good faith...

So, here in Acts 4, having devoted the entire purchase price of the property that he had sold to be administered by the apostles for the relief of poor brothers and sisters, for Ananias to keep back any portion of that purchase price for himself was, in effect, theft (cf. Polhill).<sup>†</sup> It was stealing disguised as giving. So we go on to read in verses 3-4:

**III. Acts 5:3–4** — But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie [*pseudomai*] against the Holy Spirit and to keep back [*nosphizo*] for yourself [to dishonestly appropriate for yourself] some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your authority? Why is it that you laid this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

No doubt, Ananias did not initially think his sin was so serious. We probably wouldn't, either. In our hearts, we wouldn't like to call what Ananias did, "stealing," or "theft." It's not like he took what had originally belonged to someone else. It's not even like he took back his money after it had already changed hands. He simply didn't give all of the money that he had originally pledged. If, in our hearts, we wouldn't like to call what Ananias did, "stealing," we also wouldn't like to think that his "lie" was really that serious. What Ananias likely told himself was that his deception wasn't hurting anyone else. Even if it wasn't right, what harm could it do to others?— Especially if no one else was ever to know?

But the true seriousness of Ananias' deception is exposed when Peter asks, "Why has Satan filled [*pleroo*] your heart to lie against the Holy Spirit...?" If everywhere else in Acts it's always the Holy Spirit who "fills" the believers (6:3, 5, 8; 7:55; 11:24 [*pleros*]; 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9 [*pimplemi*]; 13:52 [*pleroo*]), here it's Satan who fills the heart of Ananias to "lie against the Holy Spirit." All of our English translations say that Ananias lied *to* the Holy Spirit, but, in fact,

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<sup>\*</sup> *Nosphizo* appears in all extant literature only in the middle (BDAG).

<sup>†</sup> We remember that "everything was **common** [*koinos*]" for these believers (4:32; cf. 2:44). Diodorus Siculus was a Greek historian who wrote in the first century BC. He tells of a certain Celtic tribe where "a [property]-holder who embezzle[d] [*nosphiz(o)*] and [held] back some of the crops *which [had] been declared common property* [*koinopoieisthai*] [was] subject to the death penalty" (BDAG).

Peter’s point is stronger—and even, in a sense, far more serious—than this (cf. Polhill). In verse 4, Peter will say to Ananias, “You have not lied *to* men [dative] but *to* God [dative]” Elsewhere, when a person is said to lie *to* someone else (as in *telling* a lie), it’s almost always the dative case that’s used (2 Sam. 22:45; 1 Kings 13:18; Ps. 17:45; 77:36; 80:16; 88:36; Jer. 5:12; cf. *eis* with acc., Col. 3:9). But in contrast with verse four where Peter uses the dative (“You have not lied *to* men but *to* God”), here in verse three, Peter uses the accusative case. Consider these other examples where *pseudomai* is used with the accusative case (cf. Deut. 33:29; Job 8:18; Ps. 65:3).

- Hosea 9:2 [LES] — [The] threshing floor and a winepress did not know them, and the wine **cheated [defrauded/disappointed]** them [vs. “the wine lied to them”].
- Isaiah 57:11 [LES] — Whom did you dread and fear that you **cheated[/defrauded]** me [‘**lied against** Me,’ Brenton] and did not remember or call me to mind or your heart?
- 4 Maccabees 13:18 (Brenton; cf. 4 Macc. 5:34, NRSV) — Disgrace us not, O brother, nor **falsify [disappoint, LES; betray, NRSV]** those who have died before you [vs. “nor lie to those who have died before you”].

In each of these examples, *pseudomai* has the sense of betraying or defrauding or in some way dealing falsely with.<sup>‡</sup> In James chapter 3, we have *pseudomai* used with *kata* and the genitive case.

- James 3:13–14 — Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good conduct his works in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so **lie against [kata]** the truth [and so contradict, undermine, and falsify the truth].

This is exactly the way that *pseudomai* is being used here in Acts 5. Ananias’ “lie” is a lie not so much “*to*” the Holy Spirit as it is *against* the Holy Spirit (cf. Bock) in so far as it’s a betrayal and a denial—an undermining, contradicting, and falsifying—of the Spirit’s powerful presence in the assembly/*ekklesia* (the “church”; cf. Polhill). It’s the Holy Spirit who has brought this New Covenant assembly into existence, and who has caused “the multitude of those who believed” to be “of one heart and soul” so that “all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet” (2:32, 34-35). But now what has Ananias done? He has dishonestly appropriated for himself a part of what he had devoted to the Lord, all the while pretending to give it all. And, of course, what reveals the true self-serving motive of Ananias’ heart is the fact that he was never under any obligation to sell his piece of property in the first place (“While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?”), and the fact that once the property was sold, he was never under any obligation to share all or even part of the proceeds (“And after it was sold, was it not under your authority?”). So Peter asks: “Why has Satan filled your heart to lie against the Holy Spirit by keeping back for yourself some of the price of the land?” (the *kai* is epexegetic). Ananias’ “lie” is seen not so much in any words that he spoke as it is in the deed that he has done. “Why has Satan filled your heart to do this deed?—

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<sup>‡</sup> *Pseudomai* can have an identical meaning even when it’s used with the dative case. “Joshua said to the people, “[T]his stone... will be among you to be a witness at the last day when you should **deal falsely with** the Lord my God [dat.; Heb. ‘lest you deny/deal falsely with (*kahas*)...’ by worshiping foreign gods; vs. ‘lest you lie to’]” (Josh. 24:27).

To betray and to deny, to undermine, contradict, and falsify the Spirit’s powerful working in the midst of the assembly/*ekklesia* (‘church’)?”

**IV. Acts 5:5–6** — And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard. And the young men rose up and wrapped him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.

One commentator writes: “Perhaps no passage in Acts raises more serious difficulties for [modern] Christian readers. The judgment on [Ananias (and his wife)] seems so harsh, so nonredemptive, so out of keeping with the gospel” (Polhill). But does this reflect a “problem” with God or does this reflect our own fundamental need to learn to think more biblically and to have our own thoughts more truly conformed to the thoughts of God? We can be sure that Luke’s first “Christian readers” had no such qualms as today’s modern Christian readers. The “great fear” that came over all who heard and the fact that Ananias was buried so hastily (within three hours of his death; vv. 7-10) clearly shows that this death was understood to be a divine act of judgment and discipline. So even as we “fear” ourselves, how are we to embrace what happens here as something thoroughly redemptive and wholly in keeping with the Gospel?

The first thing we need to understand is that every sin deserves death.

- James 2:10 — [W]hoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.
- Romans 6:23a — [T]he wages of sin is death...

If God, the holy and just Lawgiver, punishes sin with physical death, what possible right can we have to complain? The far more amazing reality is that we who still sin, are daily granted life and breath and all manner of good things by our merciful and gracious heavenly Father. But still, the immediacy and severity of this judgment—pronounced, as it is, by the Apostle Peter—is only exemplified here in the New Testament and never happens today. So why here? Why does God do this “now”? Remember that word “*nosphizo*” (to dishonestly keep back for oneself)? Aside from Titus chapter 2, the only other place that this word appears in the Greek Bible (the Bible that the first Jewish Christians used) is in Joshua chapter 7.

- Joshua 7:1, 24–25 (LES) — And the children of Israel committed a great sin and **took for themselves [*nosphizomai*]** from the cursed city [the city devoted to destruction]. Achan son of Carmi, son of Zimri, son of Zerah from the tribe of Judah took from the cursed city, and the Lord was provoked to anger against the children of Israel... And Joshua took Achan son of Zerah and brought him to the valley of Achor, as well as his sons and his daughters and his calves and his donkeys and all his sheep and his tent and everything that was his, as well as all the people with him. And he brought him up to the valley of Achor. And Joshua said to Achan, “Why have you destroyed us? May the Lord cut you off in the same way even today.” And so they stoned him with stones, all Israel.

Besides the use of the word *nosphizomai* and the similarity between the sin of Ananias and the sin of Achan, there are three important parallels here. Both Achan and Ananias lived—and committed their sins—at pivotal, defining moments in redemptive history. Achan committed his

sin immediately after the Old Covenant assembly/*ekklesia* (“church”) had entered the Promised Land of Canaan and upon their defeat of the first city in Canaan (Jericho). We could even say that Achan committed his sin in direct connection with this specific redemptive-historical moment. Similarly, Ananias committed his sin immediately after the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the New Covenant assembly/*ekklesia* (“church”) by the risen and exalted Messiah. So we could also say that Ananias committed his sin in direct connection with this specific redemptive-historical moment.

Closely related to this “redemptive-historical” parallel, there’s also the emphasis on the whole assembly. While Achan’s sin was “secret,” it was nevertheless a “public” sin. He dishonestly kept back for himself a part of the spoils that the whole assembly had devoted to destruction in accordance with God’s command. Likewise, while Ananias’ sin was also “secret,” it was still a “public” sin. Ananias dishonestly kept back for himself a part of the purchase price of his field which he had devoted to the use of any who had need in the New Covenant assembly.

Not only do we have the context of “redemptive history” and of the whole covenant assembly/*ekklesia* (“church”), but also in both cases the sin is premeditated and intentional (committed with a “high hand”). Achan took what was devoted to destruction and then buried it beneath his tent. When Peter asks Ananias, “Why is it that you laid [put/placed; *tithemi*] this deed in your heart,” he’s clearly speaking of a sin committed intentionally and “with a high hand.”

When we take all these things into account, we can come to understand the unique severity of God’s judgment in the case of both Achan and Ananias. In both cases, God wasn’t just “punishing” an individual, He was purging and purifying the assembly/*ekklesia* (“church”). In both cases, God wasn’t just striking an individual person dead for his “private” sin, He was “cutting off” or “removing” an individual from the covenant community for his “public” sin. Joshua said to Achan: “Why have you destroyed us? May the Lord **cut you off [exolethreuo]** in the same way even today.” The Greek word for “cut off” is the word that’s used in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers in expressions like these: “that person shall be cut off *from Israel*” (Exod. 12:15), “that person shall be cut off *from the congregation of Israel*” (Exod. 12:19), “[that person] shall be cut off *from his people*” (Gen. 17:14; Exod. 30:33; Lev. 17:9; 19:8; 23:29; Num. 9:13), “that person shall be cut off *from among his people*” (Exod. 31:14; Lev. 17:4; 18:29; 20:18), “that person shall be cut off *from the midst of the assembly [synagoge]*” (Num. 19:20). We read in Numbers 15:

- Numbers 15:30–31 — [T]he person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, that one is blaspheming Yahweh; and that person shall be **cut off [exolethreuo] from among his people**. Because he has despised the word of Yahweh and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt will be on him.

If this was the case in the Old Covenant assembly/*ekklesia* (“church”), how much more must it be the case in the eschatological New Covenant assembly/*ekklesia* (“church”; cf. Acts 3:22-23). If we see the word, *exolethreuo* (“cut off”), in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, in Deuteronomy we see the word, *exairo* (remove), in this expression (always in the context of the death penalty): “You shall remove the evil one *from yourselves*” (Deut. 17:7, 12; 19:19; 21:21;

22:21, 22, 24; 24:7; cf. 13:5 [*aphanizo*]). So in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul commanded the New Covenant assembly/*ekklesia* (“church”) at Corinth (quoting from Deuteronomy):

➤ 1 Corinthians 5:13 — Remove [*exairo*] the wicked man from among yourselves.

If the person who sins with a high hand was to be removed from his people under the Old Covenant, how much more must the person who sins with a high hand be removed from this eschatological assembly/*ekklesia* (“church”) under the New Covenant? What was God doing when He struck down Ananias at this specific redemptive-historical moment? He was powerfully demonstrating both for that generation and for all generations to come the reality of His holy presence in the midst of this New Covenant assembly. Can you see how this isn’t only something “negative,” but also something thoroughly redemptive and wholly in keeping with the Gospel? Can you see how the death of Ananias must have everything to do with our practice of life, today, in this New Covenant Israel? This is still the place of God’s holy presence—the *ekklesia* set apart and sanctified by God’s Holy Spirit.

One commentator writes: “[O]ne is all too aware that today’s churches would be much emptier if such standards were consistently applied.” Indeed, it’s *true* that there are numerous churches today that *ought* to be much emptier. But then this same commentator goes on to say that these standards were “part and parcel of Luke’s ideal portrait of the early church in Acts. None of the standards,” he says, “fit the church of our experience—‘one in heart and mind,’ no one ‘claimed that any of his possessions was his own.’ Luke depicted it as a unique period, the new people of God in Christ, filled with the Spirit, growing by leaps and bounds. There was no room for distrust, for duplicity, for any breach in fellowship” (Polhill). Does this mean, then, that there *is* room for distrust, for duplicity, and for breaches in fellowship in the assembly today? Of course there isn’t! This commentator has missed—in the first place—the distinction between removing a person by the death penalty and removing a person by “excommunication.” At this time in redemptive history, the assembly no longer imposes the death penalty. (For that matter, neither does God, in the way that He did in Acts 5 at that specific redemptive-historical moment.) This isn’t ultimately because there’s more grace and mercy today than there was before. This is because the New Covenant Israel is no longer defined according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Therefore, today we “cut off” and “remove” the unrepentant sinner from the assembly not by imposing the death penalty, but by withholding fellowship and forbidding admittance to the Lord’s table—which is the same thing as handing over a person to Satan so that (if he is truly God’s child) he may one day be restored (cf. 1 Cor. 5:4-5; 1 Tim. 1:20).

This commentator has also missed, in the second place, the distinction between a “private” sin not with a “high hand” and a public sin with a “high hand.” If Ananias had chosen not to sell his land because of greed, or if he had sold the land and kept all the proceeds because of greed in his heart, he wouldn’t have died, and he certainly wouldn’t have come under any censures of the church. But what Ananias did is a perfect example of the kind of “public sin” with a “high hand” that must never, ever be tolerated in the Messiah’s New Covenant assembly. When a person lies against the Holy Spirit—when he sins publicly in word or deed (even if it was originally “secret”)—undermining, contradicting, or falsifying the Spirit’s powerful presence in the assembly, and especially when this person is lovingly and humbly confronted with this sin and refuses to repent, this is sin with a “high hand” and this person must be “cut off” and “removed”

from the assembly. The “discipline” of this eschatological *ekklesia* (“church”) is not ultimately a matter of our feelings or of pragmatism. “Discipline” is not ultimately to be based on how dangerous or how harmful to others we perceive someone to be. By our standards today, Ananias’ sin was relatively “harmless.” Sure, it was wrong, but should he really be cut off from the assembly (in our case) if he refuses to repent? We must be able to answer immediately, and with fear and trembling lest we also be tempted (cf. Gal. 6:1; Heb. 4:11; 2 Pet. 3:17)—YES. The “discipline” of the assembly is fundamentally an expression of the very essence of what the assembly is—it’s an expression of the reality of God’s holy presence in the Messiah’s *ekklesia*. The discipline of the assembly is, therefore (even in the absence of repentance), thoroughly redemptive and wholly in keeping with the Gospel. Now, then, we’re not at all surprised when we go on to read in verses 7-10:

**V. Acts 5:7-10** — Now there was an interval of about three hours, and [Ananias’] wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you were paid this much for the land?” And she said, “Yes, that much.” Then Peter said to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test [cf. Exod. 17:2, 7; Num. 14:22; Deut. 6:16]? Behold, the feet of those who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.” And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

We’re not surprised at this, but certainly we ought to fear and tremble. We read in Deuteronomy 21:

➤ Deuteronomy 21:21 [LES] — And the men of his city shall stone [the disobedient and rebellious son] with stones, and he shall die, and you shall **remove [exairo]** the evil one from yourselves, **and those remaining will hear [akouo], and they will [fear] [phobeo]**.

And now here, in Acts chapter 5, Luke concludes:

**VI. Acts 5:11 (cf. v. 5)** — And **great fear [phobos]** came over the whole assembly, and over all who **heard [akouo]** these things.

The point, here, is not that the people were paranoid and/or terrified that they would be next. This attitude betrays at best a lack of understanding and insight into the redemptive significance of God’s discipline, and at worst a sinful and hardened heart. The point, here, is a redemptive “fear”; a fear that is the result of comprehending the reality of the holy presence of God—the God with whom we have to do (cf. 1 Cor. 11:29-30; Heb. 4:13)—in this “assembly,” and so a fear that sanctifies and is accompanied by great joy (cf. Lk. 1:64-66; 5:25-26; 7:14-16; Acts 2:41-43; 9:31; 19:14-17). On the one hand, the reality of the assembly’s “discipline” and the thought of being “cut off” and “removed” from the assembly ought to cause us “great fear.” On the other hand, the reality of God’s holy presence in the assembly and the thought of our failing to “cut off” and “remove” from the assembly the one who has sinned and is unrepentant should also cause us “great fear.”

The assembly/*ekklesia* (“church”) functions both in the Old Testament and the New Testament as a judicial body. This explains the words of the rebellious son in Proverbs 5:

- Proverbs 5:14 (cf. Waltke) — “I was almost in utter ruin in the midst of the assembly [*ekklesia*] and congregation [*synagoge*].”

Later in Proverbs, we read:

- Proverbs 26:26 (cf. Jer. 26:10-11 [LXX: 33:10-11]) — Though [the fool’s] hatred covers itself with guile, his evil will be revealed in the assembly [*synedrion*].

In the apocryphal book of Sirach, we read:

- Cf. Sirach 23:24 (cf. Sir. 38:32-33) — [The adulteress] will be brought before the assembly [*ekklesia*], and her punishment will extend to her children.

In the Gospels, Jesus speaks of the *ekklesia*/assembly in only two places. In Matthew 16, Jesus said, “I will build My assembly [My own messianic, New Covenant *ekklesia* (‘church’)]” (Mat. 16:18). The only other place that Jesus uses this word is in Matthew 18, where He says:

- Matthew 18:15–17 (cf. 1 Cor. 5:3-5) — “Now if your brother sins, go and show him his fault, between you and him alone; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED [Deut. 19:15]. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the assembly [*ekklesia*; “church”]; and if he refuses to listen even to the assembly [*ekklesia*], let him be to you as the Gentile and the tax collector.”

## **Conclusion**

What is the meaning of the death of Ananias and Sapphira? It’s a powerful sign of the holy presence of God in the midst of Messiah’s end-times, eschatological assembly. It’s proof positive that the Old Covenant *ekklesia* has indeed been fulfilled in this Spirit-indwelt New Covenant *ekklesia*. Can we see, then, how the reformers were right to identify “discipline” as one of the three marks of a true “church”? The Belgic Confession (1561) says: “The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; [and] if church discipline is exercised in punishing sin” (Art. 29). Where there is no “discipline,” there can be no true “church” organized according to the mind of Christ (cf. LBC 26.7). But where there is discipline—exercised according to the command and rule of Christ (cf. LBC 26.7)—we can rejoice to know that we are being kept safe in that true eschatological assembly which the gates of Hades will never overpower (Mat. 16:18).