

Acts 5:12-14

Introduction

Back in Acts 2, after describing the events of the day of Pentecost and the resulting birth of the end-times, eschatological “assembly” Luke concluded:

- Acts 2:43 — And fear [*phobos*] came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

We remember that the fear that came upon every soul was the result of the people realizing what they were witnessing. They were witnessing the inauguration (the arrival) of the final act in the drama of redemptive history—the age of the Messiah and His Spirit. It wasn’t the “wonders and signs” in themselves that caused fear to come upon every soul, but rather that reality to which the wonders and signs were pointing. Maybe the best way to describe this “fear” would be a “trembling awe.” The truly wonderful realities at work here are, at the same time, not something to be trifled with; they’re not something to be treated lightly. What we’re dealing with here is the holy God now present in the midst of Messiah’s eschatological assembly in and through the Holy Spirit poured out upon “all flesh” (upon the whole assembly). Last week we saw this reality manifested in the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. After Ananias fell down and breathed his last, Luke tells us again that “great fear [*phobos*] came over all who heard” (5:5). After Sapphira fell at Peter’s feet and breathed her last, Luke tells us:

- Acts 5:11 — And great fear [*phobos*] came over the whole assembly [*ekklesia*], and over all who heard these things.

Just like in chapter two, this fear isn’t “simply” the result of the deaths by themselves. If that was the case, then the “fear” could only be paranoia and even terror. Instead, this fear is the result of being confronted with that awesome reality to which these deaths pointed.

We saw last week that in the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira God wasn’t striking an individual person dead for his “private” sin (greed, pride, deceit), He was “cutting off” or “removing” an individual from the assembly/*ekklesia* (“church”) for his (and for her) “public” sin with a “high hand.” Ananias’ and Sapphira’s sin was not so much telling a lie *to* the Holy Spirit as it was a lying *against* the Holy Spirit. Their “lie” was not so much the words that they spoke but the deed that they did, which was a betrayal and denial—an undermining, contradicting, and falsifying—of the Spirit’s powerful presence *in the assembly*. This is why if the same kind of sin was to be committed today (though it might appear in some ways comparatively “harmless”), that person must still be “cut off” and “removed” by the assembly acting in its judicial capacity under the headship and authority of Christ. Of course, the difference is that we must give opportunity for repentance and also that today we “cut off” not by the death penalty, but rather by “disfellowshipping” and denying access to the Lord’s Table—always with fear and trembling lest we also be tempted. Paul quotes the Old Testament language of “remov[ing] the wicked one from among yourselves [by the death penalty]” when he says to the New Testament believers in Corinth: “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves” (1 Cor. 5:13). The reason for the change from the death penalty in the Old Testament to excommunication in the New Testament

is not that there's more grace and mercy in the New Testament, but rather the change in how the assembly (*ekklesia*/ "church") is defined—no longer according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. This also means that whereas a sin like Ananias' and Sapphira's would almost certainly *not* have resulted in being cut off from the *Old Covenant* assembly (compare Achan's sin), it does—and must—result in being cut off from the New Covenant assembly. Here is, actually, a far stricter and more exacting standard compared to the Old Testament.

God removed Ananias and Sapphira by the death penalty (publicly announced by Peter) because at this specific redemptive-historical moment He would demonstrate both for that generation and for all generations to come the reality of His holy presence in the midst of this eschatological assembly. And so He would call us to conduct ourselves, as "the assembly," always in the light of this reality. He would call us to conduct ourselves, as "the assembly," always with "great fear"—not lying against the Holy Spirit ourselves, and also not failing to "cut off" and "remove" (under the headship and authority of Christ) the one who does lie against the Holy Spirit, and who refuses to repent.

But what does this mean for "church growth"? No matter which way you slice it, the striking dead of Ananias and Sapphira does not seem a good way to make the assembly as "inviting" as it can possibly be. To the contrary! Won't this scare people away? The same can be said for the "discipline" of the church today. The exercise of the assembly's judicial function in cutting off and removing the one who "lies against the Holy Spirit" does not seem a good way to make the assembly as "inviting" as it can possibly be to the church member, much less to my unbelieving neighbor. So we ask again: "What will these things mean for 'church growth'?" Luke continues, now, in verse 12:

I. Acts 5:12 — Now through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were happening among the people, and they [the believers] were all with one accord in Solomon's Portico.

We might instinctively feel that this verse doesn't have any real connection with what comes before. It might even seem to us rather abrupt and out of place. Two professing members of the assembly have just been "cut off" (struck dead) and now "great fear" has come over the whole assembly, and yet Luke returns immediately to this very positive (and now familiar) description of eschatological "life as usual" in the assembly.

Remember how in chapter 2 we heard about the "fear" (*phobos*) that "came upon every soul" in connection with the "many wonders and signs [that] were taking place through the apostles" (2:43). Now, after hearing about the "great fear" (*phobos*) that "came over the whole church, and over all who heard these things," we're again reminded of the "many signs and wonders" that were "happening through the hands of the apostles." As an example of these "signs and wonders," we should certainly think of the healing of the lame man in chapter 3. In just a moment Luke will tell us how the sick and demon-possessed who were brought to the apostles were all being healed (5:15-16). But we're also meant to understand that the "cutting off" of Ananias and Sapphira from the assembly also qualifies as one of these "signs and wonders." Together, these very different "signs and wonders" (the miracle of judgment and the miracles of healing) are pointing ultimately to the same reality—the powerful presence of the living God in the midst of His assembly. What's significant then—and what can even be very surprising to

us—is that immediately after recounting this “cutting off” of Ananias and Sapphira and telling about the “great fear” that came over the whole assembly, the next thing Luke writes is this: “Now through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were happening among the people, and they [the believers] were all *with one accord* in Solomon’s Portico.” This could almost feel disrespectful to us. It’s as though they haven’t skipped a beat. But what did we expect? Should the assembly be suspending all “normal” activities out of respect for those who have been “cut off”? Perhaps more to the point: Did we expect that upon the “cutting off” of Ananias and Sapphira, the remaining believers would be filled with paranoia, perhaps even abandoning the assembly themselves? Were we expecting that the assembly would begin to fracture and fall apart because it no longer felt “comfortable” and “inviting”?

Back in chapter 2, right after the reference to fear [*phobos*] coming upon every [*pas*] soul and many [*polys*] wonders and signs taking place [*ginomai*] through [*dia*] the apostles, Luke tells us that all those who had believed were “daily devoting themselves **with one accord** [*homothymadon*] in the temple (2:46). Here in chapter 5, immediately after the “cutting off” of Ananias and Sapphira from the assembly and the reference to the “great fear [*phobos*]” that came over the whole assembly and over all [*pas*] who heard, and the many [*polys*] signs and wonders that were happening [*ginomai*] through [*dia*] the hands of the apostles, the very next thing Luke says is the same thing He said in chapter 2: “And they [the believers] were all **with one accord** [*homothymadon*] in Solomon’s Portico [in the temple].” There’s a powerful reality at work here. What does this emphasis on unity and oneness have to do with the “great fear” that has come over the whole assembly in connection with the “cutting off” of Ananias and Sapphira? The answer is, “everything.” The purging and purifying of the assembly, rather than sowing the seeds of disunity or causing the assembly to fracture and break apart, has if anything only strengthened and reinforced its true unity and oneness. For us, today, who can tend to see church discipline only as a “negative” thing (apart from the restoration of the one who has sinned), this isn’t what we might have expected, and sadly it’s not what we always experience. If the assembly doesn’t *already* have a healthy sense of its identity—if “fear” has not *already* come to some extent upon every soul—then no matter how much lip service has been paid to the biblical teaching on church discipline, when that discipline is exercised faithfully according to the command and rule of Christ, the assembly will descend into disunity—fracturing and breaking apart. But there’s also a wonderful flip side to this reality.

Here in Acts chapter five, the purging and purifying of the assembly has only focused the believers’ attention with all the more clarity on what the assembly truly *is*, and as a result it has only caused them to be all the more “together” (*epi to auto* [“in the same place”]; 1:15; 2:1, 44, 47), “of one heart and soul” (4:32), and in “one accord” (1:14; 2:46; 4:24). In short: A true understanding of our identity as the Messiah’s end-times assembly (an identity which the discipline of the assembly always powerfully brings into focus) will always promote unity and oneness and a joyful “togetherness”—mixed with “great fear.” We remember from last week that this “great fear” 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—in this “assembly,” and so a fear that humbles us, and sanctifies us. We remember that wherever there is discipline—exercised according to the command and rule of Christ—we can rejoice to know that we’re being kept safe in that true eschatological assembly which the gates of Hades will never overpower (Mat. 16:18).

What did the “cutting off” of Ananias and Sapphira and the resulting “great fear” that came over the whole assembly mean for “church growth”? In the first place, it had the effect of powerfully reinforcing and strengthening the unity and the beautiful, joyful “togetherness” of the assembly (“and they were all *with one accord* in Solomon’s Portico”). Even today, if/when we should need to exercise church discipline, by God’s grace may this have the effect of powerfully bringing into focus what the assembly (*ekklesia*/“church”) truly *is* so that we might be all the more united together “with one accord.”

In verse 11 Luke said, “And great fear came over the whole assembly, *and over all who heard these things*.” If the great fear that came over “the whole assembly” resulted in its further unity, then what was the result of the great fear that came over “all [everyone else] who heard these things”? We go on to read in verse 13:

II. Acts 5:13 — Now [*de*] none of the rest dared to associate with them; but [*alla*] the people were holding them in high esteem.

It’s because of the “great fear” that came over “the rest” of those who heard these things (about the “cutting off” of Ananias and Sapphira) that they were not “daring” to associate (join) with the meetings of the assembly at the temple. Does Luke see this as a good thing? Yes, insofar as it’s a reflection of what the assembly *is*. Clearly, this doesn’t jive with the mentality today of making the assembly as “inviting” and as “comfortable” as it can be. Of course, the point here is not that we go out of our way to make people uncomfortable. Far from it! The point is simply that there’s a real sense in which people *will* be “uncomfortable” by default—and even filled with “great fear”—when we function as the eschatological, end-times “assembly” that we are. But again, this “great fear” isn’t a paranoia or a terror. Instead, it’s that “trembling awe” that even an unbeliever can have when he’s confronted with the reality of the holy presence of God in the midst of God’s people. This is why we publicly warn the unbeliever who may be present in our midst against partaking of the Lord’s Supper each week, even as we invite and exhort him to repentance and faith, and to receive baptism in the name of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 11:27-32). This is also why we’re not ashamed to publicly “cut off” from the assembly (under the command and rule of Christ) the one who has lied against the Holy Spirit and who remains unrepentant. At the same time, our prayer must always be that as we give the unbeliever “reason” not to join with us but to keep a “safe” distance, so we also give the unbeliever every reason to hold us (and the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst) “in high esteem.” “Now none of the rest dared to associate with them,” Luke says, “but the people were holding them in high esteem.” And why were they holding them in high esteem? Paradoxically, for the same reason that they didn’t dare to associate with them! Because they saw in the cutting off of Ananias and Sapphira, as well as in the unity and oneness and mutual love and care in the assembly, the reality of the powerful presence of the living God in their midst. Do we give people the same reasons to see the reality of the presence of God in our midst?

Today, with our culture’s distorted emphasis on “tolerance” and “love” (something that was unknown in 1st century Greco-Roman culture) the discipline of the assembly will often result in scorn and even in automatic accusations of vindictiveness and harshness (“kicking people out”). Instead of being a reason that people don’t “dare” to associate with the assembly even as they hold it in high esteem, the discipline of the assembly will often be used as an “excuse” to have

nothing to do with the assembly. The lesson here is that while we must never take self-righteous delight in being scorned and falsely accused, nevertheless we must not be ashamed. We can see in the scorn of the world and even in the accusations of parts of the professing church an assurance of the powerful presence of God in our midst—even as we ourselves are filled with “great fear” (lest we also be tempted). Luke wasn’t embarrassed or ashamed of the reality that the unbelievers didn’t “dare” to associate with the assembly (*ekklesia*/church). Instead, he saw this as the sign of something good.

What did the “cutting off” of Ananias and Sapphira and the resulting “fear” that “came over the whole assembly, and over all who heard these things” mean for “church growth”? In the first place, it had the effect of powerfully reinforcing and strengthening the unity and the beautiful, joyful “togetherness” of the assembly. In the second place, it had the powerful effect of causing all the unbelievers to keep a safe distance, even as they held the assembly in high esteem. In other words, it had the powerful effect of safeguarding the assembly from an unhealthy or even a counterfeit form of “growth.” But then again, in a seeming paradox, it also had the simultaneous effect of promoting the *true* growth of the assembly—the growth which is from God (cf. 1 Cor. 3:6-7; Col. 2:19). Luke continues in verse 14:

III. Acts 5:14 — Yet [*de*] more than ever believers in the Lord were added to their number [or, more than ever believers were being added to the Lord], multitudes of men and women...

Could any words have been more shocking than these at this specific place?

The point here is not that if we’re being faithful and obedient, then multitudes of men and women will be regularly added to the assembly. This is a unique redemptive-historical moment when multitudes of Jewish people who had been awaiting the Messiah for two thousand years were being brought to faith in *Jesus* as that promised Messiah. We’re also mindful of Luke’s emphasis on the “multitude” (*plethos*) of true “spiritual” seed that was promised to Abraham. But there *is* another principle here respecting the relationship between the discipline of the church and the growth of the church.

Luke just got through saying that “*none of the rest*” dared to associate with the believers assembled at the temple, even though they held them in high esteem. *Now* Luke says that “*nevertheless (de)*, more than ever believers in the Lord were added to their number, multitudes of men and women...” How are we to explain this seeming contradiction? The answer is the sovereign, saving grace of God. How are we to explain the fact that so many people were being added to an assembly from which two people had just been “cut off” by death (for what many might think of as a relatively “harmless” sin)? This defies all human conventions, and especially all human approaches to “church growth.” But once again, the answer is the sovereign, saving grace of God. The passive, “more than ever believers in the Lord *were added*,” is a divine passive. While we do plant, we don’t add the believers. While we do water, we don’t cause the growth (1 Cor. 3:6-7). It’s the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the one who promised that *He* would build His assembly (understood here in its universal sense), who adds the believers and who causes the growth (cf. Acts 2:47). This is not to say that God in His sovereignty grants this growth *in spite* of the discipline of the church and *in spite* of the “great fear” that comes over all who hear these things. The point is rather that God uses these very things to manifest His holy

presence, to convict sinners of their guilt and of coming judgment, and to convince them that the only place of true safety is within that eschatological assembly which the gates of Hades will never overpower. I'm reminded of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:

- 1 Corinthians 14:23–25 — Therefore if the whole church [*ekklesia*] assembles together and all speak in tongues, and [*if*] uninformed men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy [if all proclaim in a known language the “mysteries” of Christ in the Gospel], and an unbeliever or an uninformed man enters, he is *convicted* by all, he is *called to account* by all; the *secrets of his heart are disclosed*; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that surely God is among you [cf. Isa. 45:14; Zech. 8:22-23].

To be objectively “convicted” as guilty by the assembly’s proclamation of the Gospel, to be “called to account,” and to have the secrets of one’s heart disclosed will never be “comfortable.” But it *is* a sign of the presence of God among us. It *is* the means that God uses to bring about the true growth of Messiah’s assembly—where the Holy Spirit has now been poured out upon “all flesh.”

Conclusion

What did the “cutting off” of Ananias and Sapphira and the resulting “fear” that “came over the whole assembly, and over all who heard these things” mean for “church growth”? In the first place, it had the effect of reinforcing and strengthening the unity and the beautiful, joyful “togetherness” of the assembly. In the second place, it had the effect of safeguarding the assembly from an unhealthy or even a counterfeit form of “church growth.” And thirdly, it had the effect of promoting that true growth of the assembly which is “from God.”

As by God’s grace the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached (and lived) here, and as by God’s grace the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ is maintained here, and as by God’s grace church discipline is exercised here in punishing sin (BC, art. 29), may we all be filled with “great fear,” knowing this: that “surely, God is among us.” May this wonderful and “fearful” reality bind us together in true love and unity (5:12), may it guard us from all counterfeit “growth” (5:13), and may it be—according to God’s sovereign grace—the means of that true growth that is from God (5:14).