

Chapter 13: A Compelling Gospel

Acts 5:12–16

The previous passage about the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira was terrifying (Acts 5:1–11). If God judged their sin so harshly, what will God do with my sin? That question is not only our question as we read this story two thousand years later, but the last verse of the previous passage tells us that this was a burning question in the minds of those who heard the story—not only the church, but also “upon all who heard of these things” (Acts 5:11). At one level, this next passage may seem to stand on its own as a summary snapshot of the life of the church at this time; however, this passage is telling us about some of the fallout from God’s judgment against Ananias and Sapphira. More consequences will arise in the next passage (Acts 5:17–42), but for now we see the immediate aftermath of widespread fear of the Lord in the wake of a very public judgment of a seemingly private sin: *the fear of the Lord compels a response to Jesus*.

Fearful Reluctance (Acts 5:12–13)

So far in the book of Acts, Luke has paused twice to give overview passages that give us a quick snapshot of the most significant actions that characterize the nature of the church at a moment in time (Acts 2:43–47; 4:32–37).¹ This passage marks the third such passage, focusing on signs and wonders performed in the church, along with the corresponding responses of the surrounding people.² In the previous passage, we saw God perform miracles in the midst of the church that spoke a word of judgment against the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). In this passage, we immediately read about a very different kind of miracles that God performed in his church, where Christ does “not only declare his power, but also his goodness; to the end he may allure men unto himself with the sweetness of his grace.”³ Thus, the conjunction that the ESV translates as “now” at the beginning of v. 12 could also be translated as an adversative “but,” marking the contrast between these two passages dealing with miracles in the church.⁴ As God had performed a singular miracle in striking down Ananias and Sapphira, so he also worked numerous signs and wonders during this time by the hands of the apostles.

In the remainder of v. 12, Luke writes two sentences that are easy to translate, but a bit difficult to interpret because of the word “they” in v. 12b, especially in comparison with “the rest” of v. 13. Interpreters wrestle with the question, “Who is all together in Solomon’s Portico, and who did not dare to join them?”⁵ Bock argues that the “they” who were “all together” refers most naturally to the

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 206.

² Polhill, *Acts*, 162.

³ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:203.

⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 230.

⁵ This is not a quotation, but a summary of the dilemma posed well by Polhill, *Acts*, 163–64.

apostles, “whose ministry is the passage’s focus of description and reaction.”⁶ In my judgment, however, it is better to see “the rest” as simply a different description for “the people” mentioned in the latter part of the same verse: “None of the rest [of the people] dared join them, but [those] people [who did not dare to join them] held them in high esteem” (v. 13). Polhill, who argues for this position, explains the meaning of vv. 12–13 taken together:

The people were awed by the power of the apostles, seeing the miracles worked through their hands, and perhaps having heard the report about Ananias and Sapphira. They did not run up and join the Christian band in the colonnade but kept a healthy distance (v. 13a). Nevertheless they held the Christians in the highest regard. Luke was working with a paradox here. It is the same two-sidedness of the Spirit’s power that had just been demonstrated in Ananias and Sapphira. The power of the miracles attracts. The awesome power of the Spirit that judges also demands commitment and responsibility. Before that power the crowd kept its distance with healthy respect, unless they were willing to fully submit to that power and make a commitment. Many did, Luke said, making it clear this time that men and women became disciples and were added to the growing community of believers (v. 14).⁷

Luke is describing, then, the *compelling* nature of the church. We should remember that “great fear came upon the whole church *and* upon all who heard of” what had happened to Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:11). Although not all the people were willing to join the church, they did not pass by the church as though the church were not worth their time and attention. It is a bit like driving on the narrow winding roads up a mountain. The scenery is so beautiful, but the drop-off is so steep. You are filled with wonder and fear at the same time. You may not stop to look at the scenery, but you cannot pass through the area with the same bored disinterest that might characterize your commute home from work at the end of a long day.

This interpretation is also important to understand something about the internal relationships in the church. If “they” who were “all together in Solomon’s Portico” refers only to the gathering of the apostles, then it is unclear what kind of a gathering we are dealing with. Is this some kind of Session meeting, where the leaders are gathered to discuss and deal with the business of the church? On the other hand, if this is the whole church, then it would make sense that they are “together,” since this is the word for “together” that we might translate as “of one impulse,” which had also appeared to describe the prayers of the whole church who gathered together to pray for boldness back in Acts 4:24. As Lenski writes, “The long, roomy colonnade afforded ample space for the assembly of the thousands of Christians.”⁸ Further, “Peter had preached there [in Solomon’s Portico] after the healing of the lame man (3:11), and it was likely the customary gathering place for the Christians.”⁹ These gatherings, then, seem to describe the public assemblies of the whole church (Heb. 10:25), which are

⁶ Bock, *Acts*, 230.

⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, 163–64.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 206–07.

⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, 163.

essential for the church as a whole and for individual Christians: “For if every man will be his own teacher, and pray apart by himself, and if there be no meetings and assemblies, how excellently soever the Church be ordered and appointed, yet must it needs decay and come to nought.”¹⁰

Thus, the fear of the Lord drove Christians together for worship *and* became an institution with which the surrounding people had to reckon deliberately, either to keep away (v. 13) or to join (v. 14). Although not all joined the church, no one was able simply to ignore the church: “For there is a certain secret majesty in holy discipline and in sincere godliness, which doth even fast bind the wicked whether they will or no.”¹¹ The demand of discipleship was clearly identified as too high for those who were not coming to the church out of pure motives: “Of those who did not believe, however, none ventured to attach himself to the community; the fate of Ananias and Sapphira showed how perilous pretended or half-hearted adhesion might be.”¹²

Fearful Refuge (Acts 5:14–16)

Yet, although there were many who did not dare to join the Christians, the compelling nature of the church also drew many more to know the Lord: “And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed” (vv. 14–16). The last time Luke had spoken of the numbers of those who were converting to faith in Christ and entering the church, he had stated that “the number of the *men* came to five thousand” (Acts 4:4). Here, Luke says specifically that “multitudes of *both men and women*” were “added to the Lord.” This specific identification of the women who were coming to believe may echo the special attention that the previous story gave to the sin and judgment of Sapphira: as a woman was judged, so now many women are coming to be blessed by faith. Regarding the place of faith in this passage, notice that Luke tells us that these are “believers” who are added to the Lord.

The stories of healing echo numerous stories of Jesus’ healing ministry, especially with the idea of seeking even to have their sick come under the shadow of Peter: “One is reminded of the woman who shared a similar hope that the fringe of Jesus’ garment might heal her (Luke 8:44). In the ancient world a person’s shadow was the subject of much superstition and was believed to represent his or her power and personality, to literally be an extension of their person. Whether or not they were healed by Peter’s shadow Luke did not explicitly say, but the note underlines the strength of the apostle’s healing reputation.”¹³ The main point of significance in this passage is the fact that the “people also gathered from the towns *around* Jerusalem” (v. 16a). Although the apostles themselves are remaining in Jerusalem for the moment, the compelling nature of the church is such that people are coming to them from the outside.¹⁴

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:204.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:204–05.

¹² Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 118.

¹³ Polhill, *Acts*, 164.

¹⁴ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 214.

In this short passage, then, we are seeing a fairly complex picture emerge of the impact of the early church on those who believed in Jesus, and those who didn't.¹⁵ Although not everyone comes to faith in Jesus, no one can simply ignore him because of what the Lord is doing in the midst of his church. To be sure, the fear of the Lord that arose from the previous passage (and in response to the first wave of persecution against the Christians) is keeping some away; however, the fear of the Lord is also functioning as an irresistible attraction to others. Whatever people may make of this church, they cannot dismiss it as irrelevant, unserious, or silly. The sense surrounding this church is filled with awe, holiness, and reverence in the fear of the Lord.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the role of “signs and wonders” (v. 12a) in the rest of the Bible (e.g., Moses, Jesus)? How do such miracles relate to the prophetic word that God has given through such wonder-workers? Who specifically is performing these signs and wonders (v. 12b)? How do these miracles relate to the preaching of the apostles about Jesus? How do these miracles and the judgment miracle of the previous passage draw the church “all together” (v. 12c)?
2. Who are the people described as “none of the rest” (v. 13a)? Why is it that this group did not “dare” to “join them”? What about the fear of the Lord kept this group reluctant to get too close to the church? How does this fearful reluctance relate to their holding the church “in high esteem” (v. 13b)? What does this description tell us about the right relationship between the church and the rest of the world? What makes the church so compelling, even among unbelievers?
3. Why did the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira, along with the signs and wonders of the apostles, lead to a situation where “more than ever believers were added to the Lord” (v. 14a)? How does the fear of the Lord relate to evangelistic fruit? What do we make of the fact that Luke specifically describes this new group of converts as “believers”? What is the significance of the physical healings in relationship to their faith?
4. What makes the gospel so compelling? What makes a church compelling to her own members? What makes a church compelling to the surrounding world? In what way does this passage warn us about watering down the preaching of sin, wrath, and the coming judgment of God? How does this passage embolden you to warn those around you about the serious message of the wrath to come, and to call them to repent and believe in Jesus as their refuge on the day of trouble?

¹⁵ See similar reflections in Bock, *Acts*, 233.