

PURITY ~~AND~~ PURGING + Persecution

"For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Pet. 4:17). "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation" (1 Pet. 1:15). Personal purity within the assembly is probably the greatest single need of the visible church today. It has always been so, for even as early as the end of the apostolic age impurity had not only crept in but taken hold of some of the local groups of that day (cf. Rev. 2 and 3). Chapter 5:1-11 brings us upon a similar and sad scene, for now Satan, having been unsuccessful in attacking the church from without, now attacks from within and in relation to the matter of personal purity. "...from this point ~~onwards~~ the history of Acts is a history of murmuring (vi); dissension (xv); and sharp contention (xv 39)." Rackham p.64

I. PURITY PROCLAIMED (Review)

A. In Preaching

By way of review it is well to ~~not~~ emphasize the purity of the early group in their preaching. For instance, they preached a literal, bodily resurrection (2:24; 3:12-16). Neither did they spiritualize the millennium (3:20). Their doctrine was pure and it was in this that the church continued (2:42).

B. In practice

This will quickly be brought to mind by remembering the demonstration of their love for one another in the fellowship of goods (2:44-45; 4:32-37). There were no jealousies or quarrels--just pure love.

II. PURITY PRESERVED (5:1-11)

Man's most vulnerable spots are inside his body. Satan must have realized this in relation to the body of Christ, for the church is most vulnerable to attack from within. But in this instance God preserves the purity of the group in Jerusalem by purging. Our Lord declares that

the fruitful individual Christian will be the object of purging (Jn. 15:2); may not this principle apply to groups of Christians as well? Would to God we would remember today that often subtraction from the ranks of a church would be better than addition to them.

A. Occasion for ^{the} purging ~~the~~ ~~sin~~

Barnabas, who had just sold his land and brought the money to the apostles, was doubtless being greatly honored by the saints in Jerusalem. Ananias and Sapphira also had real estate and desired to sell it in order to get in on the public acclaim which Barnabas was enjoying. They too were stirred to action, but from very impure motives. They wanted acclaim and they wanted it at half-price.

Like Achan, they would have their wedge of gold, too; they would have their robes of honor fur-lined. So they "kept back part of the price." They talked it over to their perfect self-justification. This church communism was being carried too far, they said to each other, and unless a curb were put on this wild enthusiasm, many would find themselves in a state of dependency and beggary for their improvidence. They would be practical in their Christianity. Perhaps Barnabas himself would be glad some day for a little help out of their wise savings. Little Simon's education, too, would soon be making demands on the family exchequer, and a little caution now would enable them to give a well-trained minister to the church some day--a better gift than money! So the family of Ananias went out for the Babylonish garment with the wedge of gold to boot. J.C. Macaulay, A Devotional Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles. Grand Rapids, Mich. Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1946. p. 59.

What was their sin? It was not in keeping back part of the price they had received for their property. They had a perfect right to do that (vs. 4). It was not only their lie, for that was the outward manifestation of that which was within their hearts. The sin was hypocrisy. They pretended greater devotedness to Christ than they really had, and it was for that that they were judged.

People have come into the Church and acted hypocritically, have pretended to devotedness which was not true, to a surrender of life they have never actually made; they have pretended to be out and out for Christ when ulterior motives lay behind their actions. And the

Holy Ghost said, "You have lied to Me." It is a serious thing to be untrue in the congregation of God. God desires truth in the inward part. He wants people to be genuine, absolutely honest before Him.

H. A. Ironside. Lectures on the Book of Acts. NY Loizeaux Brothers. 1943.
p. 128.

There are unlimited applications of this today. Every time one sings "Take my Life and Let it Be" without really meaning it he is committing the same sin as Ananias and Sapphira did. Every pretence in giving with a desire for the approbation of others is in this same category (Rom. 12:8). Every half-truth is the sin of Sapphira (vs. 8). God appreciates honesty; God abhors hypocrisy.

B. Operation of the purging {

1. Through a holy man. There are not many Christian leaders like Peter. Too many Christian organizations upon receipt of a gift of money not only do not inquire into the source of the money but hardly ever discern the motive for giving. Had Ananias's gift been brought into some churches today or mission boards or Christian school it would have brought the desired effect of glorifying the giver. Perhaps Ananias would even have been put on the financial honor roll or his name inscribed on the list of donors and sealed in the cornerstone of the new building. Perhaps they would have dedicated a stained-glass window to Sister Sapphira, but not if Peter were pastor of the church. God give us more holy men with discerning eyes whom God can use in the purification of his church. Do not take shelter behind our Lord's words "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matt. 7:1); These were addressed to hypocrites. After the hypocrisy is removed our Lord said that we should "cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (Matt. 7:5).

Though Peter did not call down the judgment on Ananias, he was God's instrument to point out the sin - that was an act of God -

2. In a holy atmosphere. But it was not Peter's single-handed action that makes this story astounding--it is also the purity of the church.

It is as if there could be no other disposition of sin in such a holy

atmosphere. Morgan has put it well:

The discerning ~~of~~ Spirit was at work, and the atmosphere was such that it was impossible for a man with a lie in his heart to come in, without the lie being known and detected. The tremendous, the overwhelming part of this picture, the thing that astonishes and fills us with awe, is not the death of Ananias and Sapphira. It is rather the purity of the Church that completed that death; compelled it, not by law and control, but by the atmosphere of the Spirit in which the Church was purified, and in which the Church was wholly and absolutely at the disposal of the Spirit. p. 151.

The church must always be open to receive repentant sinners, but she must always be so pure that that very purity condemns sin within.

3. From a Holy Spirit. Quite often these days we hear, read, and sing of the Holy Spirit's tender or gracious ministry. Sometimes, one fears, it is forgotten that He is the Holy Spirit, and where the Holy Spirit reigns, sin cannot possibly co-reign. So here this sin against the Spirit is judged instantly, definitely, and openly. All sin is judged and although God may not do it in similar ways today we must never forget that heaven's silence is not consent. God is not becoming accustomed to impurity in His church; he hates it just as much today as He did in the days of Ananias and Sapphira. There are indications elsewhere in Scripture that physical death is the punishment for sin. Evidently in the church at Corinth there was a wave of sickness which was the result of the sin of disorders at the Lord's table (1 Cor. 11:30; cf. 1 Jn. 5:16). Even today there are instances in which death seems evidently to be the direct result of and punishment for sin in the lives of believers. One could cite several instances where God took a baby from a home because of sin in that home. In another instance a church quite unjustly ousted their pastor. Before the board could be called together to take official action the chairman suddenly died. A little later after the deed had been done the deacon who led in the opposition fell off a ladder and was killed. A few months after that the clerk was killed in an automobile accident.

Coincidence? No, simply shades of Ananias and Sapphira.

C. Outcome of the Purgings

1. Purity preserved. It was really an act of mercy on God's part to take Ananias and Sapphira in death (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5). It was merciful for them in order that they might not fall deeper into sin. It was merciful for the church in order that for attime at least the purity of the testimony might be preserved. Human reasoning says that such a ~~subtraction~~ drastic things would be devastating for the infant group. But often subtraction is much better than addition and such was the case here, for as a result of this purity preserved more believers were added (vs. 14). God will never fail to honor a pure testimony.

2. Fear. The purging had the second effect of generating a wholesome, godly fear within the church. "It was already a dangerous thing to be a follower of Christ unless one was willing to walk straight." Archibald Thomas Robertson. Word Pictures in the New Testament. NY. Happer & Brothers Publishers 1930. III. p. 61.

God give us more of such godly reverence. We too often worship the Lord as
in our worship
if He were little more than a man; too often we are not ~~even~~ as courteous
to our Host for eternity to a host at dinner.
~~in our worship of a holy God as we are at a formal dinner party.~~ We address
Him with disrespect; we sing of Him in strains that are far from "spiritual
songs;" we exhibit little of the terror of the Lord (2 Cor. 5:11).

3. Power. The church pure is the church powerful. This was demonstrated, if we may anticipate the next section, by the miracles that were done and the resulting salvation of many souls. It is little wonder that the church today is not powerful for she is continually grieving the Holy Spirit who is her life. Pews filled with sinning Christians make ~~lobbying~~ church lobbys necessary in government. It is much easier to seek a substitute for personal purity, for a life lived close to the Lord costs something.

THE SECOND PERSECUTION

Again Satan attacks, for the church having been purified once more demonstrates the marvelous power of God. This brings on the second persecution which ends not as the first did in a mere warning but in a beating. One would think that there is no let-up for the church and that it could not possibly survive under such difficulties. Quite the contrary is true, however, for purging brought power and persecution brings increased testimony. This is not the unusual thing for Christians; this is God's normal pattern (Rom. 8:36). It is unusual when we ~~do not~~ live in ease and comfort.

I. PRELUDE (5:12-16)

These verses are an interlude which form a bridge between the purging and the persecution. In one sense they give us the record of the results of a purified church; in another sense they record the events which form a prelude to the persecution. There are two things to notice--the events that took place among the people and the events within the church itself.

Among the people the truth was again attested by the miracles which the apostles did. Notice that the miracles are limited to the apostles. This was God's method of confirming the truth of His Word especially in the days before the completion of the written revelation of Himself. Let us not carry that to an extreme, however, so that we miss the point of the present day application. The church pure will be a miracle-working church. Would it be going too far to add that even physical and mental diseases (vs. 16) might be more often cured these days if leaders of the church were as personally pure as Peter. God was even pleased in those days to allow the shadow of Peter to effect healing as it overshadowed men. This is an Eastern expression which stands for the person himself, and doubtless the reason Peter is especially mentioned is that he appeared as the leader of the group at this time.

Within the church itself certain things had happened as a result of the death of Ananias and Sapphira which events led to the persecution.

First, they were again with one accord (vs. 12). This literally means of one mind or spirit and the word is used 10 times in Acts and only once elsewhere in the New Testament (Rom.15;6). Of course that accord had been disrupted by the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, but it is now restored.

~~Secondly, the~~ Solomon's porch was evidently one of the most public concourses and a favorite meeting place for the believers. Second, the judgment of God had taught the believers a lesson and they did not dare join themselves to the rest (vs. 13); that is, they did not dare usurp the authority of the leaders. Being of one accord did not wipe out distinctions of gifts and rank within the group. Third, many came to the Saviour including many women. But strange and wonderful thing, they were added to the Lord and not to the church. Indeed, it is doubtful if there were any membership rolls in this church.

II. PRISON (E:17-20a)

Again the Sadducees filled with jealousy ^{but of course not in a good sense that is jealousy for God?} (literally zeal) rise up and lay hold of the apostles. Their plans included the putting of the apostles in prison overnight until they could once more gather and examine them. But God had other plans. He sent an angel who opened the prison doors and told them to go and do all over again the very thing for which they had been imprisoned. This wasn't very practical, was it? It wasn't even using good common sense, but it was God's command and they dared not disobey. God deliver us from being so practical that we can never hear Him speak the unusual to us.

(Isa. 55:8). I like the apostles' response to what would naturally seem an unwise command. (vs. 21a). They did not rationalize disobedience by telling themselves how tired they were after a night in prison or by remembering how

hard they had been working or by reasoning how unwise this procedure would be; they simply obeyed and that right "early in the morning." (Luke 24:1; John 8:2 only). Why God delivered these and permitted others to die for the faith is hid in His eternal counsels, but we know He does all things well.

III. PREACHING (5:21b-39)

A. ~~Exhortation~~ To the people (5:21^b-25) that

The Sanhedrin had an embarrassing meeting ~~the next~~ morning, for when they sent for the prisoners they were gone. Indeed there was not even anything disturbed in the prison--the disturbance was all in the council chamber! But someone informed them that the disciples were back in the temple preaching and teaching among the people. People today would say that the disciples had a one-track mind--at least it was on the right track of fulfilling the Lord's great commission.

B. To the Rulers (5:26-39)

After the captain had secured the disciples and they were set before the council a formal charge was introduced. It contained two parts: (1) they had disobeyed the command of the sanhedrin not to teach in the name of Jesus, and (2) they intended to charge the sanhedrin with the death of Jesus. The first part was obviously true, and the second shows the guilty consciences of the leaders. To this charge Peter simply says that when the law of God (the great commission) conflicts with the law of rulers (the sanhedrin) then a follower of God must obey Him. At the same time Peter takes the opportunity to present the message once again to these religious leaders. He clearly states where the blame lies--"whom ye slew and hanged on a tree"--; then he states three facts about the Lord. which vindicate their message. God raised Him from the dead; God exalted Him at His own right hand; and God gave the Holy Spirit to them that obey. "Those that obey Him" are not a special class of believers but all believers, for the ~~command~~ obedience is in relation to the

command to believe (Jn. 6:29; 1 Jn. 3:23). Too many passages in the New Testament teach the universal indwelling of the Spirit in all believers for this one passage to seemingly contradict (cf.).

The result was not repentance but rage (vs. 33), and we may expect ~~six~~ yet today that the gospel will do both when preached to men (cf. 2:37).

Only the night before God had chosen to use the supernatural means of an angel to effect the deliverance of the apostles. Now He uses the natural means of the man Gamaliel to arrest the power of the council. He was one of the most celebrated teachers of the law, the teacher of Paul, and the leader of the Pharisees in the council. His motive is obvious--he simply could not let the Sadducees gain the point, and so he adopts an opportunist's policy. His suggestion is "Hands off." He suggests dodging the issue; he should have suggested an investigation at least. In support of his idea he cites two instances in which purported works of God came to nought because they were not of Him. The first, the case of Theudas, is not cited elsewhere extra-biblically. However, this is not unusual and certainly does not make the story untrue, for there were many such disturbances in Jewish history. The case of Judas of Galilee is cited by Josephus who ascribes to this movement the origin of the Zealots from which Simon had come (cf. 1:13). Gamaliel argues that if this present movement be not of God it will likewise come to nought.

IV. PUNISHMENT (5:40-42)

The Sadducees were forced to agree, but the apostles were beaten with forty stripes save one for their disobedience to the sanhedrin (Deut. 25:2,3). They were further warned and released. Notice the attitude of the disciples. They rejoiced at being counted worthy to suffer this shame for His sake. It evidently was the shame of the incident which was more painful than the beating.

Furthermore, their rejoicing ~~was~~ led to ~~activity~~ the continuation of the activity for which they had been arrested. The ~~sphere~~ ^{The extent of the activity was throughout every day (daily is the accurate of duration of time)} of the activity was both in the

temple (this must have been a great victory for them) and in their own groups in the houses. The nature of the activity was teaching, that is, instruction, and preaching, that is, evangelizing. Persecution had not dampened their ardor. The fear of compromising was greater than the fear of councils. God give us the same consistent, steady, devotion to the same task of reaching men with the good news of Jesus Christ.