

THE TESTIMONY OF A POWERFUL CHURCH
ACTS 4:32-5:11

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The passing of Oleg Gordievsky at age 86 was announced last week. (PROJECTOR ON--- OLEG GORDIEVSKY) That name may not mean much to many of you. But Gordievsky was one of the most important spies that the West ever had. He was credited by President Reagan with helping to avoid a nuclear war with the Soviet Union.

Gordievsky was motivated by a hatred of the corruption of the Communist system. He rose to become station chief for the KGB in London, where he was passing secrets to the British. He was recalled to Moscow in 1985 when suspicions arose about his loyalties. The evidence was still somewhat inconclusive. So he was allowed to have some freedom. The British managed to sneak him out of the country in a daring escape. He lived out the rest of his life in England.

Most intelligence analysts think that Aldrich Ames had something to do with the revelation of the spy work of Oleg Gordievsky. (ALDRICH AMES) Aldrich Ames was a counterintelligence officer for the CIA. But he revealed to the Russians the identity of an estimated 130 CIA agents, including ten in the Soviet Union who were caught and killed because of their work for the USA.

This case was especially troublesome in that Ames literally grew up in the CIA. His father worked for the agency. Aldrich went to school with the children of other government employees, many of them also CIA employees. Early in life he chose to follow in the footsteps of his father by pursuing a career in the CIA.

Outsiders who later reviewed Ames's career at the CIA said that his work was not especially creative or profound. Former CIA agent and author Robert Steele observed, **“Aldrich Ames was known to be an agent of rare incompetence and an alcoholic... a failure, an incompetent and a drunk.”** But because he was part of the family and because he put in his time and because he appeared not to be a problem, he came to occupy high positions in the agency.

Along the way something went wrong with Aldrich Ames. He began to put self above agency and above country and above his fellow employees. He put his own comfort and pleasure and esteem above loyalty. So Ames began to work for the Russians, who paid him \$4.6 million for his information. He was eventually caught and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. His wife was also involved in the espionage. She was also sent to prison. Outwardly the Ames's looked like every other CIA family. But their motives and behavior were a betrayal of the country they professed to serve. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the story that we are going to look at this morning we are going to see that a similar thing can and does happen in the church of Jesus Christ. People who appear to have the same motives and behaviors as other Christians can in reality have selfish motives and can in actuality be undermining the work of the Master whom they claim to serve.

We have seen from our study of the early church as recorded in the Book of Acts that this Christian movement grew rapidly. We have seen that miracles performed at the hands of the apostles helped to spread the gospel of Christ. We have seen that the healing of the lame man in Acts #3 caused more Jews in Jerusalem to respond to the preaching of Peter and to become followers of Jesus.

We also have seen signs that persecution was going to come upon the Christians. The Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism, was beginning to feel threatened by the spread of this Jesus movement. They called in Peter and John and warned them to stop talking about Jesus. Persecution, however, would not stop the growth of the church. Historically persecution often causes Christianity to grow and to be purified in the process. But now in our passage today we will see a more serious threat arise, as Satan creates problems within the church. Here we will find warnings that apply to each of us.

I.

First, from vv. 32-37 of #4 I want for us to note THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A POWERFUL CHURCH. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE CHARACTERISTICS OF...) The church of Christ was flourishing. It was new and young, but the power of God was clearly evident. These verses identify several of the characteristics of a powerful church.

A.

In v. 32 we see that it had UNITY. (I. THE CHARACTERISTICS... A. UNITY) **“Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.”** In John’s gospel #17 (JOHN 17:21) beginning in v. 21 Jesus had prayed for His disciples saying, **“[I pray] that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (JOHN 17:22) The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, (JOHN 17:23) I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”** Unity among Christians is by itself a powerful witness to unbelievers of the truth of the gospel.

Clearly Jesus’ prayer for unity has been answered. That unity is reflected in a selfless attitude toward personal possessions. It was fundamentally the work of the Holy Spirit. But no doubt the opposition of the Sanhedrin and persecution from other Jews contributed to that unity.

In graduate school I encountered students who had attended Christian colleges, and I found out that there was not always such great unity. There were theological disagreements as well as personality conflicts.

I attended a secular university. Among the Christian students there I found a tremendous sense of unity. I don't remember any major disputes or factions among us. What was the difference? We were a distinct minority, and we were living in an environment that was often hostile toward evangelical Christians. That kind of opposition can have a positive effect of contributing toward the unity of fellow believers. So the fact that we live in a culture which is often hostile toward evangelicalism can be a plus in the sense that we believers may feel a greater need to be close to each other. After all, our metropolitan area prides itself in being known as Sin City.

B.

This early church was powerful not only because there was unity but also because there was a BOLD WITNESS. (I. THE CHARACTERISTICS... A. B. BOLD WITNESS) Look at v. 33. Luke writes, **“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”** In v. 29 in the aftermath of the Sanhedrin's order to Peter and John to stop preaching about Jesus the Christians had prayed for boldness. According to this brief summary that prayer had been answered. Apparently this grace--- this answered prayer for boldness-- - extended beyond the apostles to the other followers of Jesus.

Notice that the focus of their bold witness was the resurrection of Jesus. Why was that the emphasis, as opposed to the death of Christ, or some other aspect of the gospel? It was because the Sanhedrin and the Jews of Jerusalem all knew about the death of Jesus. That was not in dispute. The question was about the meaning of that death. If Jesus had truly risen from the dead, then there was an obligation to listen to His claims and what His disciples said about this Jesus. The Jewish leadership had difficulty dealing with this claim about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. They could not find the body to disprove it. According to the Gospel of Matthew they had even ordered a guard to be placed to watch the tomb. The evidence was that Jesus had somehow escaped the tomb. But these Jewish leaders were hard-hearted, and they did not want to believe.

The thing for us to note is that the Christians had prayed for boldness in their witness, and God had answered. We should remember individually and as a congregation to pray for boldness and opportunities for our witness.

C.

The third characteristic of this powerful church is identified in vv. 34-37. It is SHARING WITH THE NEEDY. (I. A. B. C. SHARING WITH THE NEEDY) According to vv. 34 & 35, **“There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of**

lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

The cause of neediness is not specifically mentioned. The church by now included 5000 men plus women and children. So there were no doubt needs that would arise simply by virtue of the usual course of life. There were probably widows and orphans and sick people and the unemployed who needed assistance. We also know from John's gospel that before the death of Jesus, the Jewish leaders were already kicking people out of the synagogue who identified themselves as followers of Jesus. So probably additional needs arose when new Christians were fired and kicked out of their homes because of their faith.

Notice also that the focus of concern was on the needs of fellow believers. We Christians are never to be oblivious to human needs and suffering around us. But our priority in social concern is always to be on the needs of fellow believers. The Apostle Paul (GALATIANS 6:10) in Galatians #6 v.10 said, **"So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."**

So the Christians of substantial means were selling houses and property to meet the needs of believers in their midst. They were not necessarily selling off all of their real estate. The text doesn't say that. (PROJECTOR OFF) Also their giving was voluntary. In order to be part of this church one did not have to turn over all of his financial resources. There were other groups in Judaism at this time, in Christianity later on, and in cults today that pressure or require members to turn over their financial assets in order to be full members of the group. The Bible doesn't say that God requires that of His people

In fact this display of unselfish sharing and sacrificial giving seems to be unique even in the early history of the church. Later on in Acts we see Christians contributing to the needs of fellow believers, and we see collections taken up. We find exhortations to Christians to be regular and sacrificial in their giving. But there is nothing quite like what happened in the first days of the church. No doubt the powerful working of the Spirit of God was a factor in this early community. Some have suggested also that these first Christians may have had a strong expectation that Jesus was coming back very soon to set up His kingdom. Personal possessions thus seemed unimportant in the larger scheme of things.

This giving was also an overflow of the oneness of heart and mind that these believers were experiencing. It was a true display of sacrificial love. Financial giving to the work of the Lord is always a practical test of the love of God. It is an indication of what is truly important to us in life, of what the source of our real security is. The famous London preacher of the 1800s, Charles Spurgeon (PROJECTOR ON--- CHARLES SPURGEON), once said, **"Giving to God is no loss; it is putting your substance in the best bank. Giving is true having. As the old gravestone said of the dead man, 'What I spent, I had; what I saved, I lost; what I gave, I have.'"**

Notice also that the Christians entrusted their gifts to the spiritual leaders of the church for proper distribution. We have something in our church that is called the deacons' fund. (PROJECTOR OFF) This fund is used much like the money given to these first century apostles was used. We give it primarily to people in our congregation who are suffering from financial needs. If you ever want to contribute to this fund, note that in your check or add a written note to the cash which you contribute.

In vv. 36 & 37 of our passage Luke describes a specific example of one who gave in the manner described. This illustration of the principle also introduces us to an individual who will have a significant role later in the Book of Acts. Luke tells us that the man's name is Joseph and that he is a Levite. According to the Old Testament Law Levites were not supposed to even own property. Levites were to be involved in helping in the temple and teaching and administering the Law. The Jewish people were to support them financially so that they could carry on with these tasks. By this time the Biblical system of support seems to have broken down. This Joseph was not even living in the land of Israel. Luke tells us that he was from the island of Cyprus.

We are also told that Joseph was called Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement." Later on in Acts we will see further evidence of this character trait in Barnabas. In this passage Barnabas provides encouragement by selling a tract of land and giving all of the proceeds to the apostles. The Book of Proverbs encourages wise people to save and to invest one's finances wisely. But the Bible also recognizes that the best investment policy includes significant giving to the work of the Lord. This investment ultimately provides the highest yield and the greatest dividends. By virtue of his inclusion in the Book of Acts Barnabas is still drawing interest on the investment strategy he employed in the early church. His sacrificial giving contributed to the power of the early church. If we want increased power as a local church, we should strive for unity, a bold witness, and sharing with the needy.

II.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE CHALLENGE TO A POWERFUL CHURCH) A powerful church is always going to attract the interest of Satan and his forces. That's what happens in vv. 1-11 of #5. Thus we are going to look here at THE CHALLENGE TO A POWERFUL CHURCH.

A.

In vv. 1 & 2 we are going to discover SIN FROM WITHIN. (II. THE CHALLENGE... A. SIN FROM WITHIN) Luke writes, **"But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.**

A Jewish couple by the name of Ananias, which name means "graced by God," and Sapphira, which means "beautiful," apparently became aware of this generous gift made by Barnabas. They saw the positive reaction of the apostles and the Christian community as a whole. That doesn't mean necessarily that Barnabas made a showy

presentation of his generous gift to the apostles. It could be that he made it privately. But generous gifts even given in private have ways of becoming known. When I was in seminary, the chairman of the theology department was a very quiet, humble man. He didn't really like attention drawn to himself. He hated it when people asked for his autograph on one of the many books that he had written.

But this man was also independently wealthy. I never heard any teachers or the school itself say anything publicly. But a couple of different students who seemed to know said that he only accepted a dollar a year as salary for his job. They also indicated that he donated the expensive organ that was put in the school chapel. Though his gift was given quietly and privately, word seemed to get around about what he had done.

I get the impression from the passage that Ananias and Sapphira saw the positive attention that came to Barnabas for his generous gift. They thought that it would be nice for them to get that kind of attention, too. So they decided to sell some land that they owned. But instead of giving all of the proceeds to the apostles, they kept some of it for themselves.

Jesus frequently spoke about the use of money and how it relates to eternal values. He was betrayed by Judas partly for the sake of money. Now the use of money becomes an issue in the early church.

Ananias and Sapphira had no obligation to sell any land at all. Once they had sold it, they had no obligation to give all of the proceeds to the apostles. The problem was that they presented their gift with the indication that this money represented the total amount of the sale. They were saying that they were giving everything to the church.

Ananias and Sapphira wanted double profit. They wanted the spiritual prestige that would come to them from making a sacrificial gift. They also wanted the money that they had set aside for themselves.

This is one reason why private, secret giving is the better way to go. (MATTHEW 6:2) Jesus said in Matthew #6, **“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. (MATTHEW 6:3) But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, (MATTHEW 6:4) so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”**

That lesson was lost on Ananias and Sapphira. They were guilty of both lying and hypocrisy. They didn't tell the truth, and they pretended that they were something that they were not. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The initial application of pressure from the outside doesn't seem to hinder the effectiveness of this budding Jesus movement. Indeed the history of persecution of Christianity would indicate that persecution often purifies and strengthens the true

church. Satan is not stupid. In v. 3 we are going to see that he is behind this effort to cause problems from within the church. It is pressure and evil from within the church that is much more dangerous.

While the CIA was focused on threats to the country and the agency from the outside, Aldrich Ames was at work on the inside wreaking havoc. But fellow employees for a long time didn't have a clue. He seemed to be involved in the same work and dedicated to the same cause. He had deep roots in the agency. To outward appearances he was one of them. In truth he was working for his own selfish cause.

A similar thing can happen in the local church. Just one person can be used by Satan to wreak havoc in a local church. That person at some point decides to put his agenda or her desire for recognition or his desire for power or her desire for revenge above the agenda of the church or above the agenda of the Lord. That personal agenda can be cloaked in religiosity and professed concern for the church and the Lord. But it creates difficulty in the church. It usually is reflected in criticism or rumors or gossip that begins to spread among a congregation. Sometimes there is a grain of truth at the root of the criticism or rumor or gossip. But because it is not dealt with in a Biblical way, it produces division in the church.

There is legitimate room for policy differences in a church and for doctrinal discussions, and church leaders should be held accountable. But we need to watch out for Christians in our midst who are creating divisions in the church because they simply desire to promote their own agenda and want to bring attention to themselves. As far as I know we don't have any problem of that nature going on here. But we always need to be on guard against it.

I was in a church once that had a music minister who was a constant cause of friction. He had a philosophy of music that was always at odds with that of the senior pastor. In the end he would give just enough to keep from getting fired. But he wouldn't meet with the pastor, and he would largely do his own thing. At the church's annual meeting you could count on this man to profess his commitment to the church and then to proceed to criticize some proposed action of the church board. From what I could see, he was just a corrupting influence within the church.

I am very thankful that we just don't have that kind of problem in our church. We may have some discussion of proposals at our annual meetings, but we don't have people that disagree just to be disagreeable. But we always need to check our own motives, and we need to be careful that we don't fall in with those who are promoting themselves rather than Christ.

B.

In vv. 3-10 of our passage we encounter GOD'S JUDGMENT OF SIN. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. A. B. GOD'S JUDGMENT OF SIN) Notice the confrontation that Peter has with Ananias in v. 3: **"Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?"** Clearly Ananias

was part of the church. He and his wife were genuine believers. Yet Peter says that Satan has filled his heart to lie to the Holy Spirit. The verb that he uses is the same one that Paul uses in Ephesians #5 v. 18 when he tells Christians to be filled with the Holy Spirit. So Satan and his forces are able to influence Christians who are not walking with the Lord.

Notice also that Peter assumes that the Holy Spirit is a person. He has personality. He can be lied to. The Holy Spirit is credited with empowering these early Christians and with uniting them together into the body of Christ. Ananias is, in effect, claiming that his gift stems from the same motivation as that of Barnabas. He is presenting himself as one empowered by the Holy Spirit. But it is a lie, and it is a lie specifically against the Holy Spirit.

Peter continues in v. 4 by saying that Ananias didn't have to sell the land. When he sold it, he didn't have to give it all to the church. Whether Peter knew what was really going on as a result of the revelation of God or by some human inside source, we are not told. But by claiming that he was giving all the money to the church Ananias was lying to God. Notice also that God is here equated with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God.

Then v. 5 says, **"When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it."** It would appear that this was the sovereign judgment of God. The phrase "breathed his last" appears in only one other place in the New Testament. In Acts 12 it is used of the death of King Herod Agrippa who is struck down by God when he blasphemes. So there is a hint in the use of this verb itself that Ananias's death was the result of the judgment of God. The context also suggests it. Shame and guilt and conviction of sin may have played a part in his death. But primarily Ananias was struck down as a result of the judgment of God.

My guess is that Peter was almost as surprised as anyone else to see Ananias die before his eyes. After all Peter had betrayed Jesus. Yet the Lord had graciously forgiven him. God did not exercise that same kind of grace here.

So they went right out and buried Ananias. Burials in that time and culture usually happened soon after death. It still happens today among many Jewish religious communities. But why they didn't wait for Sapphira to be present, we can only speculate. Perhaps Peter knew that the same fate awaited her, and there was no point in waiting to find her.

Three hours later the same judgment comes upon the wife of Ananias. The meaning of v. 8 seems to be that Peter asked her what price she and her husband got for the sale of their land. She lied to his face and told Peter that the price was the same as what they gave to the church. So she also is struck down and taken out to be buried.

Peter gives a slightly different description here to the sin of Ananias and Sapphira. He categorizes it as putting the Spirit of the Lord to the test. In Deuteronomy 6:16 (DEUTERONOMY 6:16) God told Moses and his people, **"You shall not put the Lord**

your God to the test..." In one of the temptations that Satan used with Jesus, he took the Lord to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and told Him to throw Himself off of it. Then the devil quoted a passage from the Old Testament about angels bearing Him up. It seems that there was also a tradition among some of the Jews that the Messiah would reveal Himself to the people from this pinnacle of the temple. But Jesus refused Satan's temptation and answered with the words of Deuteronomy 6:16: **"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test..."**

So Ananias and Sapphira were presuming upon the grace of God. (PROJECTOR OFF) They knew that what they were doing was wrong. But they were trusting that God wouldn't do anything major about it. They were putting God--- specifically the Holy Spirit--- to the test.

Christians as well as critics of the Bible have had a hard time understanding why Ananias and Sapphira were dealt with so harshly. It's true that they lied, and it's true that they acted like hypocrites. But God seems so harsh. If God decided to deal with us in the same way for our dishonesties and our little acts of hypocrisy, we might have a pretty small crowd here next Sunday.

There are several factors that may help us to understand why God acted as He did. The **first** involves the story of Israel's entrance into the land of promise under the leadership of Joshua. Before the Hebrews conquered the city of Jericho, Joshua told his people (PROJECTOR ON--- JOSHUA 6:17), according to Joshua #6 v. 17, **"And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction."**

But when the walls of the city came tumbling down and the Hebrews went in and conquered Jericho, a guy named Achan spied some treasure that looked especially inviting and took it. When the Hebrews then attacked the next city the soldiers had to flee for their lives. (PROJECTOR OFF) God revealed to Joshua that somebody had messed up at Jericho. Using lots, they eventually got down to Achan, who confessed that he had taken some of the booty. Joshua then took Achan and his whole family outside of the camp and had them stoned.

Israel was about to embark on a new phase in the plan of God. God's chosen people were about to enter the land of promise that was occupied by very pagan people. God chose to use harsh discipline to impress upon His people the importance of being a holy people in the midst of unholy people. Now in the Book of Acts the people of God were also embarking upon a new phase in the plan of God. They likewise had to learn the importance of holy living in the midst of unholiness.

A **second** factor in God's judgment may have been the fact that Ananias and Sapphira were held to a higher standard because of their exposure to the power of God. Just as Achan had witnessed the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River and the miraculous destruction of Jericho, Ananias and Sapphira had apparently witnessed the signs and wonders that were being performed in the early church at the hands of the apostles.

Then **thirdly** God is always concerned about the purity of His church. In 1 Peter #3 (1 PETER 4:15) beginning at v. 15 the apostle wrote, **“But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. (1 PETER 4:16) Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. (1 PETER 4:17) For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God.”** The Lord would not allow corruption to infect the church at this time. He taught these early Christians a hard lesson about the importance of holiness.

Verse 11 describes the effect that this judgment from God had: (PROJECTOR OFF) **“And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.”** This is the first use of the word “church” in the Book of Acts to describe the followers of Jesus. But notice that this fear extends not only to people within the church but also to unbelievers outside of the church. Unbelieving Jews gained respect and reverence for the God of these Christians when they learned about what happened. Christians learned an important lesson about the need for holiness and purity within the church.

A powerful church will be characterized by unity, bold witness, and sharing with the needy. But a powerful church will also be faced with spiritual warfare. The most dangerous warfare is that which comes from within the congregation.

From what I can tell our church is reasonably healthy. We have a good spirit of unity. We have some effective outreaches. So we can expect opposition from the forces of evil. We had best be on guard for difficulties within our ranks. The best way to do that is to be sensitive to our own motives, to guard our own hearts, to make sure that our focus is on the Lord and not upon the self. If we do that, we can expect that the Lord will continue to use us.

British writer and preacher G. Campbell Morgan said, **“The church pure is the church powerful.”** Let’s work together on being a pure church before the Lord.