

The believers were thriving, the witness of Peter and John had been challenged by the Jewish religious establishment who rejected God's second overture to them to repent. The believers were knit together in love and others, seeing this, were attracted to join them. Many were selling their real estate holdings and brought the proceeds to the apostles. Satan couldn't stand it. The world system he had so carefully crafted to engage men's souls was of little interest to these saints of God. He finally found a couple whom he could corrupt, Ananias and his wife, Sapphira. Sin entered the assembly. It wasn't some gross sexual immorality or even a large theft or swindle. Was it an act of covetousness to withhold some of the proceeds of a sale? Not really, for none of us are asked to sell all we have to give to the Lord. Some do indeed, and some go out into the Lord's work in faith but our instructions are to lay aside something as the Lord has prospered us weekly. We should at least do that, even if all we can give is a buck. It is part of our worship as Hebrews 13:16 tells us. It wasn't sinful to only give part of their income. The Jewish law only asked a tithe, a tenth, though that was really a tax not a gift. Anyone could voluntarily give more in devotion to Jehovah. So what was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira? Hypocrisy! Peter explained it to them. They had agreed to pretend they were giving all the funds from the sale to the apostles. But they secretly held back some while appearing to be as generous as others. The sin was the lie. A lie to the Holy Spirit. To God. To Christ's apostles. To His assembly comprised of His own. It was not so much a sin of selfish greed as of selfish hypocrisy (which usually stems from pride.)

God's response was swift, clear and decisive. Instant death with no opportunity to repent and be forgiven. Whoops! Where is the loving God who delights to bless? The One Who so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son, Who sent the Holy Spirit to convince them, indwell them and save them from hell. God is HOLY.

Psalm 93:5 *Holiness becometh thine house, O LORD, for ever.*

But isn't He loving? Yes! Doesn't He save wicked sinners? But love does not tolerate wickedness, a premeditated intentional lie. WHAM! God cleansed His Assembly—the bearer of the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Many feared to join themselves to them, yet many were added to them. The outcome of this stunning judgement had contrasting solemn and delightful elements. Are we to take care to know those we receive into the local assembly of saints? God couldn't have said it more powerfully or clearly than right here in the beginning. He doesn't want us to tolerate evil in anyone or anything bearing the Name of Christ. Decades later Peter restates this stand in 1Peter 4:17. This judgment involves at most

exclusion. It is the same as the Old Testament judgement of being cut off from among one's people. There is absolutely no instance in scripture where God justifies torture of a suspected heretic as was so brazenly practiced in the middle ages. Nor is physical violence by any believer on behalf of Christ's Name against any person or place ever described or encouraged in Scripture. Yet historically both Roman Catholics and Protestants practiced it. Shame!

Where did Peter get authority to act as he did? From the Lord Himself, who gave him the keys to the kingdom of heaven and the power to bind and loose sins, Matthew 16:19. Peter bound Ananias' and Sapphira's sin on them. They died! He didn't curse them or dramatically call down judgement from heaven upon them. God just did it. The other apostles had also been given authority to bind and loose sins, John 20:23. They are no longer with us but the Lord also gave that authority to the assembly gathered unto His Name, Matthew 18:15-21. Both immorality and doctrinal error as to Christ are valid grounds for exclusion. By God's mercy and grace, exercising our responsibility to exclude sin doesn't extend to capital punishment. God acted as He did in Acts 5:10 only that once, to demonstrate His displeasure publically and to instruct the godly thereafter. He may still act in less dramatic ways if an assembly is careless or indifferent about holiness. Paul cites an example in Corinth, 1Corinthians 11:27-32. John cites a sin unto death, 1John 5:16,17. Paul calls upon each local assembly to exercise judgement over those within, 1Corinthians 5; Galatians 1:8-9; 5:9-11. Shouldn't we? We should each avoid walking carelessly. And we should wash one another's feet and faithfully exhort and encourage one another,

*Hebrews 10:23 Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) 24 And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: 25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.*

And we ought to respect the dignity and authority of each local assembly as Christ's representative to bind and loose, sins of professing believers among them. We honor the decisions of other assemblies as well. An assembly decision is clearly not infallible, but it is binding upon all believers worldwide until rescinded or withdrawn. This responsibility is just as solemn as it was in the days of Acts 5, and Acts 15.

Next we see Satan openly opposing the preaching of Christ's Name. The disciples remained respectful but firm with the officials. They refrained from railing accusations and resisted any temptation to call down judgement from heaven upon those stubborn men who would not repent

and accept Jesus as Lord and who persistently resisted the Gospel. Today we hear some preachers calling upon God to bind Satan, or even attempting to bind Satan themselves in the Name of Jesus. If Christ's own apostles didn't do that why would any believers think they have authority to

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do so today. Some even rail against Satan. Peter rebukes this in his second epistle, written to equip us for the last days,

*2Peter 2:2:9 The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished: 10 ¶ But chiefly them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government. Presumptuous are they, selfwilled, they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities. 11 Whereas angels, which are greater in power and might, bring not railing accusation against them before the Lord. 12 But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption;*

*Jude 1:9 Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee.*

The apostles had tremendous powers and had authority to use them but the authority, although broad, was limited. We will see God's purposes, limits and boundaries within which they operated as we continue in Acts. They did not attempt to reign before Christ returned. We shouldn't either.

As to the arrested apostles, God didn't free them the first time but He did the second. He let Herod execute James but miraculously spared Peter, again by angelic opening of prison doors and invisibility to the guards. Here He used a respected Pharisee's advice, reasoned from his own historical perspective, to bring about their release. He intervened with an earthquake for Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail. But later did not intervene for Paul's release until he got to Rome, testified and obtained

a legal release. As we progress through Acts, consider possible reasons why God handled various cases differently. Watch for reasons stated in the epistles as well. In any case we learn to not lose heart but to be thankful in all circumstances as having been sent or allowed by God. We learn to be respectful and subject to the powers that be. We do not count upon signs and miracles (although there will be some) for they would not be miracles if they were commonplace. We learn to be alert to recognize temptation and to seize upon opportunities to serve and witness and wait for Christ's return for us.

The disciples hadn't yet learned the Lord was not coming immediately to establish His Kingdom. They were attempting to get Israel to repent to open the way for His glorious return to it. They would soon be disappointed but not for long as they took to the wonderful new standing, mission and opportunities God presented them.

Gamaliel was an intriguing person. Though a Pharisee he was very highly respected on all sides, a doctor of the Law of Moses. He was wise, humanly speaking, but he was not a man of faith. After reviewing some earlier movements that had flourished briefly then come to nothing he advised them to let this one ride its course also. They did so, but this time he was wrong. It has "run its course" for almost two thousand years now. Israel has been set aside nationally, the Church established as a heavenly body of the faithful, and you and I are believers today because they let it "run its course." Praise God who sovereignly uses whosoever He will to accomplish and fulfill His will and objectives. Watch as He works today in these end-times that we are surely in. Endure hardness! Entreat sinners to repent! Encourage fellow saints along the way. Enlighten one another in the scriptures. Enjoy Christ and His own!

By Ronald Canner, August 5, 2009