

We Ought to Obey God Rather Than Men

By Dan & Brenda Cathcart

The video version of this teaching is at: <https://youtu.be/wllhhcbioMo>

The scripture reading is Acts 4:32-5:42

This section of scripture from the book of Acts contains a vivid picture of the rapidly growing body of believers in and around Jerusalem following the empowerment of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. They began to form a coherent community resembling a kind of commune. They came together with one heart and one purpose.

Acts 4:32-35 NKJV 32 Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. 33 And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. 34 Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.

What was it that brought them together in this communal community in Jerusalem? Most of the early apostles were Galileans, not from Jerusalem. But as we can see they were staying on in Jerusalem.

In this account, we see them daily in the Temple praying with, and teaching larger and larger crowds of new believers. As their popularity grows among the people, we see that they become a greater and greater threat to the Sadducean leadership of the Sanhedrin and Priesthood. We see the apostles arrested and, once again, imprisoned only to be miraculously released. We see on full display the power of the Holy Spirit acting through the apostles.

The Temple was the central anchor for the new believing community in Jerusalem. They had determined to sell their property and contribute the proceeds to provide to the community. Communal living was not a new concept in the first century. The Essenes lived in isolated communes mostly well away from other more traditional communities in the land. The economic life described by Luke here in the book of Acts is somewhat like that of a modern Kibbutz in Israel today. The disciples of Yeshua however did not adopt the monastic practices of the Essenes, nor the secular socialism of the modern kibbutz.

The apostolic community in Jerusalem used their resources to meet the needs of the poor within their community. It was not a system of wealth redistribution, but an opportunity to provide for those in need. Widows and orphans are those specifically mentioned many times in scripture. They are the most vulnerable and least likely to have a means of self-support. The Apostles sought to fulfill specific provisions of the Torah.

Deuteronomy 26:12 NKJV 12 "When you have finished laying aside all the tithe of your increase in the third year-the year of tithing-and have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your gates and be filled,

There are clear indications that not all disciples donated all their possessions to the community. Acts 2:46 and 4:34 for instance, indicate that some retained their own private residences. Private ownership of property and enterprise are a necessary part of Torah living. The concept of tithing and leaving the corners of one's field would be lost in an economic system without private ownership. Charity is central to the Torah and to the teachings of Yeshua. This growing community in Jerusalem gives us a pattern of the kinds of communities that we should build in our world today.

Luke then gave a couple of specific examples of those joining and giving to the community. The first is a man by the name of Barnabas.

Acts 4:36-37 NKJV 36 And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, 37 having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Acts 13:1 lists Barnabas as a prophet and teacher. Barnabas may have come from a wealthy Levitical family. His kinswoman Mary, the mother of John Mark, owned a large house in Jerusalem where many of the disciples would meet.

Next Luke relates the often-misunderstood story of Ananias and Sapphira, who also sold some property to give the proceeds to the Jerusalem community.

Acts 5:1-4 NKJV 1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. 2 And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? 4 "While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

As we see from the account, Ananias and Sapphira made a serious and fatal mistake. What was their sin? Were they not at liberty to sell their property for the benefit of the community or themselves? The answer is Yes they were, but Ananias held some profits back and claimed he had given entirety of the profits to the community coffers.

At the time of the apostles, it was not uncommon for people to sell property and give the proceeds to the Temple treasury. It is apparent that Ananias and Sapphira vowed to give all the proceeds to the community and lied about holding some funds in reserve. Peter, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, calls Ananias out on his deception. Peter acknowledges that the property in question was Ananias' to do with as he pleased, but once he had vowed to give it to God it could not be taken back. Ananias didn't lie to just Peter and the others, he lied to God by deceiving the Holy Spirit with very serious consequences.

Acts 5:5-6 NKJV 5 Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. 6 And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.

Moses warned the people about taking a false vow.

Deuteronomy 23:21-23 NKJV 21 "When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you. 22 "But if you abstain from vowing, it shall not be sin to you. 23 "That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth.

Ananias was defiant, lied to God and was struck down on the spot. After Ananias went missing for several hours, Sapphira came looking for him and was also confronted by Peter.

Acts 5:7-10 NKJV 7 Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." 9 Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." 10 Then

immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband.

There is a conundrum among Christian readers of this passage about Ananias and Sapphira. How is the swift judgment at the direct hand of God supposed to be interpreted in light of the grace and mercy granted through Yeshua? This kind of divine justice is often viewed to be limited to the Old Testament, why then, under the dispensation of grace, is such justice meted out? How is this reconciled?

The lesson is that God is the same God, yesterday, today, and forever! Sin could not be allowed to continue in the camp of the Children of Israel in the wilderness, and sin could not be allowed to remain in the community of believers in Jerusalem either. Ultimately, the story of the fate of Ananias and Sapphira would serve a positive purpose going forward.

Acts 5:11-12 NKJV 11 So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

The “great fear” spoken of in this verse is not fear in our modern understanding. First Fruits of Zion in their work *The Chronicles of the Apostles* writes:

“From a Jewish perspective, great fear is a positive virtue, so long as it is the fear of the LORD. In the Bible, to “fear the LORD” means to believe in Him and to believe that he punishes sin and rewards righteousness.”ⁱ

There were many signs and wonders performed by the apostles through the power and leading of the Holy spirit. Many more believers were added to their numbers on a daily basis. They continued to meet house to house and spending their days in the Temple courts, specifically in an area known as Solomon’s Porch. The single most important aspect of this community and their meeting together is that they were in one accord!

Acts 5:12-14 NKJV 12 And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch. 13 Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. 14 And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,

The place of their gathering in the Temple, Solomon’s Porch, ran the entire length of the Temple mount on the eastern side opposite the Mount of Olives. The apostles would have been a daily fixture in the Temple, going up for the daily prayers and Temple rituals.

This fast-growing body of believers in Yeshua of Nazareth as Messiah certainly got the attention of the Sadducees and the chief priests. The fame of the apostle’s signs and wonders was spreading across the region. Many sought healings from many diseases and demonic influences.

Acts 5:15-16 NKJV 15 so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. 16 Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

This was a near repeat of what the people did when Yeshua walked the streets and marketplaces.

Mark 6:56 NKJV 56 Wherever He entered into villages, cities, or in the country, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged Him that they might just touch the hem of His garment. And as many as touched Him were made well.

The thing about Peter's shadow seems a bit crazy until one realizes that Jewish law affords a certain status to the shadow of people and things. Accordingly, a person contracts ritual impurity when he or she overshadows a corpse or a grave. And one is not allowed to enter the shadow of a tree that has been used for idol worship. The people ascribed a power to Peter's shadow. One's shadow is considered an extension of the shadow-caster.

Now, the men of the Sanhedrin were really paying attention!

Acts 5:17-18 NKJV 17 Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, 18 and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison.

The apostles had become a direct threat to the power structure of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. Not only did the apostles gain a very large following of the people, but their theology and teaching was a direct challenge to that of the Sadducees. The apostles were proclaiming a risen Messiah, a clearly Pharisaic doctrine, as well as a returning Messiah and the undying spirit within man.

The apostles were once again preaching and teaching in the name of Yeshua of Nazareth in direct defiance of a previous order given to Peter and John. The Jewish leaders decided to stop the spread of this teaching by arresting all twelve of the apostles and placing them in the city jail under guard. It didn't work!

Acts 5:19-21 NKJV 19 But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 "Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life." 21 And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.

The angel released them from the jail and disappeared, leaving them with instructions to return to the Temple in the morning. The next morning the Sanhedrin arranged to meet to discuss the fate of the prisoners not knowing that they were missing from their jail cell when they sent for them.

Acts 5:22-24 NKJV 22 But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, 23 saying, "Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!" 24 Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be.

The officers of the court returned to the Sanhedrin with a puzzling report. The jail cell was still locked, the guards were present and had not fallen asleep through the night, but the prisoners were not there. Perhaps this reminded Annas and Caiaphas of the empty tomb of Yeshua himself not many months prior. While they were arguing the situation, a messenger came to the chamber and told them that the apostles were once again in the Temple courts preaching and teaching in the Name of Yeshua.

Acts 5:25-26 NKJV 25 So one came and told them, saying, "Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" 26 Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned.

This time the Captain of the Guard and his men approached the apostles and took them quietly because they feared a riot by the people if they made a show of re-arresting them. They were again brought before the Sanhedrin and questioned.

Acts 5:27-28 NKJV 27 And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, 28 saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!"

The Sanhedrin may have not had the authority to exact capital punishment under the current Roman rule, but they did have a great deal of authority and the enforcement troops to make it stick. Could they also turn these twelve over to the Roman authorities for execution? Caiaphas was accusing them of contempt of court. According to the Torah, defiance of the Sanhedrin could result in the death penalty.

Deuteronomy 17:12 NKJV 12 "Now the man who acts presumptuously and will not heed the priest who stands to minister there before the LORD your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall put away the evil from Israel.

Caiaphas was also accusing them of stirring up the people against himself and the Jewish leadership by pointing out that the Council was responsible for Yeshua's death at the hands of the Romans. In verse twenty-eight, Caiaphas stated "...you intend to bring this Man's blood on us." This was rather hypocritical of Caiaphas since he himself had accepted responsibility for Yeshua's death at the time.

Matthew 27:24-25 NKJV 24 When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it." 25 And all the people answered and said, "His blood be on us and on our children."

Peter stood and gave his answer objecting to the accusations stating that their obligation to testify for Yeshua outweighed their obligation to follow the orders of the Sanhedrin.

Acts 5:29-30 NKJV 29 But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. 30 "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree.

This was a very bold statement on the part of Peter. He confirmed in public testimony that he was indeed accusing them of murdering Yeshua! Peter declared that God had raised Yeshua from the dead and had exalted Him. Peter testified that the apostles could not obey the order against testifying in Yeshua's name because they were His designated witnesses.

Peter testified that it is the Holy Spirit who testifies on behalf of Yeshua. It is the Holy Spirit who testifies to the validity of the apostles' claims of a risen Messiah through the greater signs and wonders performed by the apostles.

Yeshua told the twelve that when they stood trial for His sake, they should not worry about what to say.

Matthew 10:19-20 NKJV 19 "But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; 20 "for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.

Peter spoke for the other eleven apostles that day in the chamber of the Sanhedrin with the boldness that Yeshua promised would come upon them with the Holy Spirit. That same Spirit is promised to all believers and followers of Yeshua. As we go forward today, speaking and teaching the people around us, let us also rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to carry us through the trials that we will surely face as we present the good news of the risen Messiah to the fallen world around us.

Study Questions:

1. Acts 5:12-16 describes the many signs and wonders that followed the apostles. It seems that these were commonplace at that time. Why is it that we don't often see this kind of manifestation of the action of the Holy Spirit today? Or do we?
2. At the end of the teaching portion for today, (Acts 5:33-42. Not covered in the video) the apostles are ultimately released from the Sanhedrin. Discuss Gamaliel's argument to the court and the court's response. What was the result of the apostles' appearance before the court?
3. The apostles and others in the community are described as being in "one accord." What does this mean exactly? How does their actions and daily life reflect being in "one accord?" Compare your thoughts on the meaning of "one accord" with Greek word translated as one accord. (Strong's number 3661)
4. Compare Ananias and Sapphira to Achan found in Joshua 7:1 & 10-12.
5. When someone pledged the proceeds from the sale of their property to the community of believers, the Bible says they placed it at the feet of the apostles. How is this term used in other passages of scripture and what does it mean?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

Bonus: The apostle Paul was a student of Gamaliel. The same who convinced the Sanhedrin to "leave these men alone." Why do you think Paul did not follow his Rabbi in this approach to the community of believers?

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ⁱ FFOZ, The Chronicles of the Apostles, D. Thomas Lancaster Vol. 1 p. 108