

100% Authentic?

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read [Acts 4:32-5:11](#)



“Costly generosity” might be a suitable title for today’s reading. However, that doesn’t really cut the mustard. Maybe a better title would be “Seller beware!”, riffing on the popular warning to purchasers everywhere. But again, that doesn’t really give the essence of what we read here. Maybe the best way to come up with a suitable title is to look at the whole thrust of the passage and see what becomes apparent.

Let’s start at the beginning of the text for today. The new church is entirely united. They are all “one in heart and mind” (4:32), which is a marvellous state to be in, but one that we cannot sincerely say that we share. Whether it is across the global church, or in the little village chapel, we will find disagreement, whether its over deep aspects of theology or the colour of the new carpet.

We have to take it on face value that the text describes a perfect state of being; the church unified and unifying through the Good News proclaimed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Lives are being transformed and the community of faith is growing. The wider society is benefitting as possessions are shared and no-one goes without.

Add to this idyll the generosity of people like Barnabas, who selflessly hands over the proceeds of his property sale to the stewardship of the church.

Is it any surprise that good things are happening? The Good News brings good fruit. Forgiveness, grace and love abound; boundaries are broken down and there is a desire to see that all are beneficiaries of God's generosity.

But of course, the church is populated by members of the human race and, if there's one thing that sets us apart from the other mammals that roam this planet, it's our uniquely creative and imaginative way of messing the whole thing up.

Enter Ananias and Saphira. Luke, as author and chronicler of the church's formative years, goes so far as to name them, something that our poor healed beggar of chapter 3 never benefitted from. Remember their names, seems to be the clear message. And for good reason.

Maybe feeling the pressure of their co-congregant Barnabas' generosity, the soon-to-be-unhappy couple sell an unspecified "piece of property" (5:1) and present what they claim to be the entire amount they received at the feet of the apostles (5:2). Whether this is literally true, and the disciples suddenly found themselves ankle deep in coins is not really important, though it does paint an amusing picture. Which is probably just as well, as, like the gravediggers in Shakespeare's Hamlet, the humour precedes the tragic consequences of their actions.

It must be made plain that their sin, their shame, and their guilt was not in holding back some of the proceeds of the sale of their unnamed property. Peter makes this clear (5:4), but it is also worth repeating here. My namesake, communicating some years later to the church in Corinth says that "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7), reinforcing the message that generosity needs to be balanced with good humour.

When jealousy, pride, greed, or whatever caused Ananias to lie to Peter about the gift, the consequences are lifechanging. Life-ending for Ananias, as Peter confronts him with his deception, and he drops dead at those same feet that had recently been showered by the contentious gift. Whether from shock or from guilt, we aren't party to the cause of death, though it is interesting to note that there is no indication of divine intervention as we read of in the Old Testament (c.f. the delightfully named Er in Genesis 38:7 and Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6:6-7, among others).

Quickly following her husband into the disciples' presence, Saphira follows him out shortly later in the same manner, another life extinguished by the seriousness of her sin.

This is an uncomfortable period for the church. The response of the community is of fear, increasing as word spread about the seriousness of the situation. But this is in many ways no different from the life they have been living.

The generosity of the community had meant that people were able to live when their circumstances and situations would usually have led to an early grave. Food was provided to stave off starvation, shelter offered to protect from the elements and unsavoury aspects of Jerusalem's nocturnal life. People were being given a chance to live thanks to the life-giving Good News of the gospel.

Whether Ananias and Saphira's death was purely a coincidence of undiagnosed heart failure or wilful soul failure, there was more at stake for the fledgling church. This was the first attack on the harmonious life that was being celebrated at the start of the passage. Ananias and Saphira could have given the same amount, declared that it was only 75% (or whatever) of the sale, and all would have been fine. Their decision to try to deceive their friends, not least their Saviour, showed an unsavoury attempt to undermine the core message of the fledgling church.

Peter knew only too well the cost of following Jesus. He also knew that joining Jesus on his journey around Palestine had taken him far from his fishing nets and had opened a whole new world of possibility to him.

Of course, he had on one occasion returned to those same fishing nets (John 21:3) and there must have been times when he hankered after the fishy smell of Galilee, miles away from the dung-filled streets of Jerusalem. But he was no longer a fisherman, as the encounters with Jesus had shown him a better way and had continued to show him the path of grace.

Peter's horizon had grown, his vision had expanded, and the gospel was reaching further and wider. Christ's life had demonstrated this broad sweep, looking outward towards the ignored, the oppressed and the outcast. The church was having a serious impact on the world around it because it ministered to that same world.

Ananias and Saphira's sin was to look inward, not outward. They tried to portray the same selfless attitude of Barnabas, Peter and the others, while trying to hide their selfish desires. For a community that embodied Christ's arms outstretched on the cross, just as he embraces the world in their sin, they embraced their neighbour with generous acts of grace and love. Ananias and Saphira wanted to look like they were fully signed up to this, but they really weren't.

So, what do we learn about this for us today, as we're starting to look towards this "new normal" life, where we still have to be cautious and sensible in the face of an as yet incurable virus?

It would be great to say that we're striving to see the church emerge as a modern equivalent of the community that we see described in Acts 4:32-35. I would love to see a church that is as united as they were, a global movement that mirrored its urban beginnings, with generosity and agreement at its heart. But two thousand years of theological wrangling and selfishness has maybe made this a virtually impossible dream.

How about a plea for authentic faith instead? Ananias and Saphira were guilty of selfishness, absolutely, but they were also guilty of pretending that they were, if not "holier than thou", as least as holy as Barnabas. How many of us have also been guilty of over-playing our Christianity? Maybe it's only me, but I used to occasionally cast a shifty look around the congregation while a song was being played, trying to work out where people were on a spirituality scale: singing along - jogging along well; singing with eyes closed to prove that they knew the song off by heart - pretty impressive; singing with arms raised in worship - getting closer to heaven; singing in tongues - spiritual perfection! I hope that you realise that I'm satirising myself here, as I love a good sing in church (or at home).

The church in Acts 4 was epitomised by the authentic, lived out faith of those who counted themselves as Christians. For some of them, Peter for example, this had meant leaving behind his former life and livelihood in response to the call of Christ. For others, they served at tables, they preached in the temple courts, they prayed for the sick (and saw healings happen). Barnabas was an example of one whose authentic faith led him to sell a field for the good of the community; Ananias and Saphira were examples of those whose inauthentic faith led them to lie. They fell into the trap of thinking that authentic faith could only mean a certain way and suffered the consequences of that decision.

Whatever we do, however we act out our faith in Jesus, I pray that we would do it in authentic ways, being honest with ourselves and each other about the limitations that we have, as we face this unwritten future together.

Amen.

(Photo by [Simon Maage](#) on [Unsplash](#))