

**I. THE DEVIL ATTACKS THE CHURCH'S HOLINESS AND UNITY**

**A. The NT Church was a beautiful thing. God's people believed in Jesus, they loved God, they believed His Word and they loved one another. Two things were true of the Church: she was holy and she was one.**

- 1. Part of the church's life was the members' love for one another. The rich believers shared their money with the poor believers.**
  - a. In those days, a rich believer would sell some property which he owned, a house, a field, etc., and would bring the money and "[lay] it at the apostles' feet." Then the apostles would distribute it.
  - b. In Acts 4:36 a man called Josès Barnabas sold some land and brought the price to the apostles.
  - c. Very likely, Josès Barnabas received praise for this act from the people.
- 2. There was a couple in the church who desired the praise of men but did not want to give so much money. Their names were Ananias and Sapphira.**
  - a. They too sold some property, but *instead of bringing all the money* they brought only part.
  - b. That in itself was not wrong. We do not have to put all our money on the church offering plate.
  - c. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was lying. They sold a property, kept some of the money for themselves, but pretended that they gave all the money to the church. They wanted people to think that they were as generous as Josès Barnabas.
- 3. The Bible tells us that the devil filled their heart to do this. The devil wanted to make the church unholy by having wicked people in it as members.**
  - a. Ananias and Sapphira said that they believed in Jesus; they were baptized; they seemed to be believers but secretly they were hypocrites.
  - b. They made a plan together. They lied on purpose. They planned what they would say, how much money they would bring, and they thought no one would ever know.
  - c. But God knew. God saw their hearts. God was angry with them and was determined to punish them. God knows the hearts of all. He knows when people are planning to do evil while pretending to do good.
- 4. God punished Ananias and Sapphira for their sins. They thought that they would hear words of praise but instead God killed them!**
  - a. Ananias came first, as they had planned, with a bag of money. He laid it at the apostles' feet. Imagine what Ananias said, "Look, I sold my field for 1000 pieces of silver. Here it is" (But he really sold it for more than that).
  - b. But Peter said to Ananias, "Ananias, why hast Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost and to keep back part of the price of the land? ... thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God" (Acts 5:3).
  - c. On hearing these words, Ananias immediately fell down dead to the ground! And the young men took him out and buried him!
  - d. *Three hours later, Sapphira arrived.* She did not know that her husband was dead. Peter asked her, "Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much?" and she said, "Yea, for so much" (Acts 5:8). Then Peter said, "How is it that ye *have agreed together* to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out!" (Acts 5:9).
  - e. Why did God kill Ananias and Sapphira? What was the reaction of the people? God killed these two hypocrites to keep His Church holy and pure. After this wicked people were afraid to join the Church. How does God keep the Church holy today?

**B. The devil hated the pure and holy life of the church so he tried to use Ananias and Sapphira to destroy that. The devil also hated the unity of the church so he tried to divide the members of the church.**

- 1. An argument arose in the church about the distribution of alms ("alms" are mercy for the poor).**
  - a. In Jerusalem there were two kinds of Jews: the Hebrew-speaking Jews (the "Hebrews") and the Greek-speaking Jews ("the Grecians"). Both believing Hebrews and Grecians were members of the church. And each group had widows, poor women whose husbands had died.
  - b. Every day the alms were distributed to the widows and other poor. This was the job of the Apostles. But soon, as the church became very large, the work became very difficult. In the busyness there was a complaint: the Grecians were being neglected in the distribution of alms!
  - c. This led to much murmuring in the church. The Grecians did not trust the Hebrews. The Hebrews were angry against the Grecians. Where was the love? The devil loves to see fighting in the church.
- 2. The apostles could see a problem. They did not have the time to distribute alms because their chief work was preaching and prayer. But the poor must also be looked after in the church. What should they do? The Lord provided the answer. The church received the office of deacon.**

- a. The apostles told the men of the church to choose out seven men to be deacons. A deacon has the task of collecting the alms, distributing the alms, visiting the poor and comforting them with the Gospel.
- b. With the office of deacon there were men who made sure that both the Hebrews and the Grecians were cared for, and this meant that the apostles had time for their work of prayer and preaching.
- c. The first seven deacons are named in Acts 6:5. These men were full of the Holy Spirit, wise and godly. The apostles laid hands on them. Stephen and Philip are the best known of these deacons.

## II. THE DEVIL ATTACKS THE CHURCH FROM THE OUTSIDE

### A. When the devil's attempt to destroy the holiness and unity of the church failed the devil tried persecution.

#### 1. The high priest was filled with anger that so many people were believing in Jesus; he was angry at the apostles' miracles & especially at the apostles' preaching that Jesus is Messiah who rose from the dead.

- a. While the twelve apostles were preaching in the temple they were arrested and put in prison.
- b. Remember that Peter and John had been in prison before. Now *all* the apostles were arrested. Their "crime" was disobeying the high priest's earlier command not to preach in Jesus' name.
- c. The rulers of the Jews planned to take the apostles out of prison the next day and punish them, but when the officers went to bring them, they found that the prison was empty, Acts 5:23.

#### 2. The apostles had not broken out of prison. In the middle of the night an angel had come, opened the door of the prison with the command of God. "Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people" (v. 20).

- a. So, when the apostles were out of prison, they did not hide from the rulers. They went back to the temple and preached to the people!
- b. While the rulers were wondering where the apostles were a messenger came, "Behold the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people" (Acts 5:25).
- c. The rulers were afraid of the people, so they sent the officers to take the apostles quietly and without violence.

#### 3. Again the apostles were found in front of the Sanhedrin: "Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? And behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine and intend to bring this man's blood upon us!" (Acts 5:28).

- a. But Peter and the other apostles answered that Jesus is the promised Savior, that they [the Jewish leaders] had killed Him, that God had raised Him up, and that they [the apostles] must obey God rather than men.
- b. When the men of the Sanhedrin heard this they wanted to kill the apostles, but instead they followed the advice of Gamaliel: be careful, wait and see what happens.
- c. So, they did not kill the apostles. They did not let them off with a warning either. They *beat* them. And the apostles rejoiced because they were counted worthy to suffer for Jesus and they did not stop preaching, and the church continued to grow! They made that response to suffering by God's grace.

### B. Prison and beatings did not stop the church's growth and witness so the devil tried murder.

#### 1. Stephen was one of the seven deacons, a godly man, able to do miracles and preach Jesus.

- a. He had much wisdom and was able to argue from the OT Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ, and the Jews could not answer him. So, they accused Stephen of blasphemy.
- b. They brought false witnesses against Stephen – he speaks against the Law, against Moses and against the temple. Of course, none of this was true.
- c. When the high priest heard what Stephen was doing, Stephen had to appear before the Council.

#### 2. Acts 7 records Stephen's speech before the Council. In his speech he defends himself but the leaders of the Jews were so angry with Stephen that they screamed at him, put their fingers in their ears, gnashed their teeth and dragged him outside the city.

- a. Then they picked up stones and threw them at Stephen until Stephen died.
- b. As Stephen was dying he had a vision, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). And before he fell down dead he said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit ... Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (v. 59-60).
- c. There was a young man there looking after the coats of the men who stoned Stephen. His name was Saul, and God answered Stephen's prayer in Saul's life.