

# Resources for Churches...

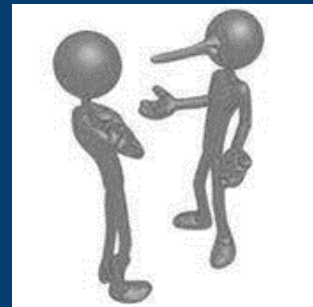
## Responding to the Coronavirus

### Dealing with Deception

#### The Acts of the Sent Ones - Acts 5: 1-11

Here we have something of a reality check. The picture of the community of believers in Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37 may sound idyllic, but Luke doesn't gloss over this evidence of sin within the fellowship of believers. It might be tempting for us to hurry past this incident to the next bit, but the fact that Luke thought it important enough to record it as part of the story of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those he had sent to continue the work of Jesus means we should do the same.

The overall story of the Bible has two facets, both of which we see here. The first is of a God who calls people to live in relationship with him, to love him and live according to his ways, and to be a light to the world through this. The second is of the world as God's good creation in which a dark power is at work to destroy. Thus far in the book of Acts we have heard the first: the coming of God's Spirit to reveal to people the truth of the gospel, to stir them to belief in Christ and to live in their hearts. The result is faith, boldness, wisdom, love for God and love for one another. They 'had everything in common' (2:44) and were 'one in heart and mind' (4:32). Now Luke tells us something of the second.



As we learned last time, when money was required to meet the daily needs of members of the community, people sold their property and donated the proceeds (4:32-37). Barnabas sold a field and placed the money at the apostles' disposal. Now, at first glance, we have Ananias and Sapphira doing something very similar. Except that it couldn't have been more different. Instead of their either donating the total sum raised, or donating part of the sum raised but being totally open about this (which they were perfectly at liberty to do), they had colluded together in a secret policy of deception. They both separately insisted, even when challenged, that they had donated the full amount raised. The magnitude of this was not in their greed and dishonesty, that they deceived the apostles and betrayed the trust of the community, but that they lied to God. As Peter makes clear to them, they both lied to the Holy Spirit and put him to the test. Far from being an act prompted by the Spirit, this was an instance of the dark force of Satan working through them to destroy the fellowship and integrity of the whole community.

There is no getting round the fact that the apparent image of a God who smites sinners makes us feel uncomfortable today. We need to note that Luke records the incident without specifying the reason for their deception or the direct cause of their death. He just reports what happened. However, this is a one off - not something that becomes normal in the church anytime anyone sins. Luke records it as another sign of God's power at work, the sign that sin will be judged and the sign that the issue of sin within a church fellowship is to be taken seriously. We can see something of this re-emphasised in the later words of Paul: Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives among you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple (1 Cor 3:16).

The Book of Acts as a whole relates the Holy Spirit's giving life to, empowering and guiding the church in every situation. Ananias and Sapphira's greed and deception and unwillingness to repent when they had the opportunity are in direct opposition of this. The consequences emphasise the severity of their actions. Paul also warns the early church not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God by speaking and behaving in ways which harmed their relationships and destroyed their unity (Eph 4:29-32).

# Dealing with Deception (cont)

## The Acts of the Sent Ones - Acts 5: 1-11

What do you think this has to say to us about the degree of reverence and respect we have for God himself and his holy presence within the church?

How we should regard behaviour within our own church that threatens the unity of the fellowship and the integrity of our relationships?

Whilst Luke makes clear the sin they committed was to lie to the Holy Spirit, the issue involved was money. What is our attitude to our finances and our giving to God?

Are we totally honest with ourselves and others about what we give and what we keep for ourselves and the reasons we use to justify this?

Does your giving arise out of a genuine concern for the needs of others or from a need to have the approval of others (see Matt 6:1-4)?

Does the level of giving and sharing we read of in this fellowship of believers challenge you about the extent of your own generosity?

Can you genuinely say that Jesus is the Lord of our finances or is there another voice in your ear?

Does Mark 8:34-38 give you any further insight?

Peter knew this matter needed dealing with and was given wisdom and insight into what to say. It is common in church life today for us to turn a blind eye to harmful behaviour within the church for the sake of avoiding conflict.

Is avoiding 'rocking the boat' the right course of action or are there times when the Holy Spirit would have us speak his truth into such situations?

Do you see church discipline as something to be avoided at all costs or something that may be necessary in order to uphold the ways of God's kingdom and promote healthy church relationships?

Jesus had given his disciples practical instructions on how to deal with sin in the church (Matt 18:15-17). Was what Peter did in line with what Jesus had taught?

Paul speaks of admonishing one another in a positive light – something that helps us grow and mature as believers e.g. Col 1:28, and an outworking of our care for one another (1 Thess 5:12). What might help us recognise it as an act of love and learn to receive it with grace?

This is the first instance where the community of believers is referred to as the 'church' (v11). Perhaps this challenge to the community's life and integrity had served not only to fill them with fear but also a firm assurance of who and whose they were – a group of people gathered by and filled with God's Spirit and called to be a sign of God's kingdom – a way of life totally unlike any other.

Read 1 Cor 13:4-7. What new insights have you gained through this weeks' reading?

How will you respond in practice to what you have learned?