**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-021. THE WHEAT AND THE TARES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common."*

*Acts 4:32*

*"And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things."*

*Acts 5:11*

Once more Luke pauses and gives a general survey of the Church's condition. It comes in appropriately at the end of the account of the triumph over the first assault of civil authority, which assault was itself not only baffled, but turned to good. Just because persecution had driven them closer to God and to one another, were the disciples so full of brotherly love and of grace as Luke delights to paint them.

**I.** We note the fair picture of what the Church once was. The recent large accessions to it might have weakened the first feelings of brotherhood, so that it is by no means superfluous to repeat substantially the features of the earlier description (Acts 2:44, 45). The multitude is used with great meaning, for it was a triumph of the Spirit's influence that the warm stream of brotherly love ran through so many hearts, knit together only by common submission to Jesus. That oneness of thought and feeling was the direct issue of the influx of the Spirit mentioned as the blessed result of the disciples' dauntless devotion (Acts iv. 31). If our Churches were filled with the Holy Ghost, we too should be fused into oneness of heart and mind, though our organisations as separate communities continued, just as all the little pools below high-water mark are made one when the tide comes up.

The first result and marvellous proof of that oneness was the so-called community of goods, the account of which is remarkable both because it all but fills this picture, and because it is broken into two by verse 33, rapidly summarising other characteristics. The two halves may be considered together, and it may be noted that the former presents the sharing of property as the result of brotherly unity, while the latter traces it (for, 5:34) to the abundant divine grace resting on the whole community. The terms of the description should be noted, as completely negativing the notion that the fact in question was anything like compulsory abolition of the right of individual ownership. Not one of them said that aught of the things which he possessed was his own. That implies that the right of possession was not abolished. It implies, too, that the common feeling of brotherhood was stronger than the self-centred regard which looks on possessions as to be used for self. Thus they possessed as though they possessed not, and each held his property as a trust from God for his brethren.

We must observe, further, that the act of selling was the owners, as was the act of handing the proceeds to the Apostles. The community had nothing to do with the money till it had been given to them. Further, the distribution was not determined by the rule of equality, but by the need of the recipients; and its result was not that all had share and share alike, but that none lacked.

There is nothing of modern communism in all this, but there is a lesson to the modern Church as to the obligations of wealth and the claims of brotherhood, which is all but universally disregarded. The spectre of communism is troubling every nation, and it will become more and more formidable, unless the Church learns that the only way to lay it is to live by the precepts of Jesus and to repeat in new forms the spirit of the primitive Church. The Christian sense of stewardship, not the abolition of the right of property, is the cure for the hideous facts which drive men to shriek Property is theft.

Luke adds two more points to his survey,--the power of the Apostolic testimony, and the great grace which lay like a bright cloud on the whole Church. The Apostles' special office was to bear witness to the Resurrection. They held a position of prominence in the Church by virtue of having been chosen by Jesus and having been His companions, but the Book of Acts is silent about any of the other mysterious powers which later ages have ascribed to them. The only Apostles who appear in it are Peter, John, and James, the last only in a parenthesis recording His martyrdom. Their peculiar work was to say, Behold! we saw, and know that He died and rose again.

**II.** The general description is followed by one example of the surrender of wealth, which is noteworthy as being done by one afterwards to play a great part in the book, and also as leading on to an example of hypocritical pretence. Side by side stand Barnabas and the wretched couple, Ananias and Sapphira.

Luke introduces the new personage with some particularity, and, as He does not go into detail without good reason, we must note his description. First, the man's character is given, as expressed in the name bestowed by the Apostles, in imitation of Christ's frequent custom. He must have been for some time a disciple, in order that his special gift should have been recognised. He was a son of exhortation; that is, he had the power of rousing and encouraging the faith and stirring the believing energy of the brethren. An example of this was given in Antioch, where he exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. So much the more beautiful was his self-effacement when with Paul, for it was the latter who was the chief speaker. Barnabas felt that his gift was less than his brother's, and so, without jealousy, took the second place. He, being silent, yet speaketh, and bids us learn our limits, and be content to be surpassed.

We are next told his rank. He was a Levite. The tribe to which a disciple belongs is seldom mentioned, but probably the reason for specifying Barnabas was the same as led Luke, in another place, to record that a great company of the priests was obedient to the faith. The connection of the tribe of Levi with the Temple worship made accessions from it significant, as showing how surely the new faith was creeping into the very heart of the old system, and winning converts from the very classes most interested in opposing it. Barnabas' significance is further indicated by the notice that he was a man of Cyprus, and as such, the earliest mentioned of the Hellenists or foreign-born and Greek-speaking Jews, who were to play so important a part in the expansion of the Church.

His first appearance witnessed to the depth and simple genuineness of his character and faith. The old law forbidding Levites to hold land had gradually become inoperative, and perhaps Barnabas' estate was in Cyprus, though more probably it was, like that of his relative Mary, the mother of Mark, in Jerusalem. He did as many others were doing, and brought the proceeds to the assembly of the brethren, and there publicly laid them at the Apostles' feet, in token of their authority to administer them as they thought well.

**III.** Why was Barnabas' act singled out for mention, since there was nothing peculiar about it? Most likely because it stimulated Ananias and his wife to imitation. Wherever there are signal instances of Christian self-sacrifice, there will spring up a crop of base copies. Ananias follows Barnabas as surely as the shadow the substance. It was very likely a pure impulse which led him and his wife to agree to sell their land; and it was only when they had the money in their hands, and had to take the decisive step of parting with it, and reducing themselves to pennilessness, that they found the surrender harder than they could carry out. Satan spoils many a well-begun work, and we often break down half-way through a piece of Christian unselfishness. Well begun is half--but only half--ended.

Be that as it may, Peter's stern words to Ananias put all the stress of the sin on its being an acted lie. The motives of the trick are not disclosed. They may have been avarice, want of faith, greed of applause, reluctance to hang back when others were doing like Barnabas. It is hard to read the mingled motives which lead ourselves wrong, and harder to separate them in the case of another. How much Ananias kept back is of no moment; indeed, the less he retained the greater the sin; for it is baser, as well as more foolish, to do wrong for a little advantage than for a great one.

Peter's two questions bring out very strikingly the double source of the sin. Why hath Satan filled thy heart?--an awful antithesis to being filled with the Spirit. Then there is a real, malign Tempter, who can pour evil affections and purposes into men's hearts. But he cannot do it unless the man opens his heart, as that why? implies. The same thought of our co-operation and concurrence, so that, however Satan suggests, it is we who are guilty, comes out in the second question, How is it that thou hast conceived this thing in thy heart? Reverently we may venture to say that not only Christ stands at the door and knocks, but that the enemy of Him and His stands there too, and he too enters if any man opens the door. Neither heaven nor hell can come in unless we will.

The death of Ananias was not inflicted by Peter, Hearing these words he fell down and died. Surely that expression suggests that the stern words had struck at his life, and that his death was the result of the agitation of shame and guilt which they excited. That does not at all conflict with regarding his death as a punitive divine act.

One can fancy the awed silence that fell on the congregation, and the restrained, mournful movement that ran through it when Sapphira entered. Why the two had not come in company can only be conjectured. Perhaps the husband had gone straight to the Apostles after completing the sale, and had left the wife to follow at her convenience. Perhaps she had not intended to come at all, but had grown alarmed at the delay in Ananias' return. She may have come in fear that something had gone wrong, and that fear would be increased by her not seeing her husband in her quick glance round the company.

If she came expecting to receive applause, the silence and constraint that hung over the assembly must have stirred a fear that something terrible had happened, which would be increased by Peter's question. It was a merciful opportunity given her to separate herself from the sin and the punishment; but her lie was glib, and indicated determination to stick to the fraud. That moment was heavy with her fate, and she knew it not; but she knew that she had the opportunity of telling the truth, and she did not take it. She had to make the hard choice which we have sometimes to make, to be true to some sinful bargain or be true to God, and she chose the worse part. Which of the two was tempter and which was tempted matters little. Like many a wife, she thought that it was better to be loyal to her husband than to God, and so her honour was rooted in dishonour, and she was falsely true and truly false.

The judgment on Sapphira was not inflicted by Peter. He foretold it by his prophetic power, but it was the hand of God which vindicated the purity of the infant Church. The terrible severity of the punishment can only be understood by remembering the importance of preserving the young community from corruption at the very beginning. Unless the vermin are cleared from the springing plant, it will not grow. As Achan's death warned Israel at the beginning of their entrance into the promised land, so Ananias and Sapphira perished, that all generations of the Church might fear to pretend to self-surrender while cherishing its opposite, and might feel that they have to give account to One who knows the secrets of the heart, and counts nothing as given if anything is surreptitiously kept back.