Acts 5:1-11 (Julius Anton Wilhelm Eugen von Poseck) 144465

The Gospel and the Church, Gospel and the Church: 18. Ananias and Sapphira, The (5:1-11)

In the solemn case of Ananias and Sapphira we see the discipline of the Son over His own house carried out by the power of the Holy Spirit in the chief of the twelve. Ananias and his wife had" agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord," and for that sin of hypocrisy and effrontery, they suffered death by the power of the "Spirit of truth" (against whom they had lied) acting through Peter. This case was not one of church discipline in the strict sense, inasmuch as the church as such could bake no active part in it (except by practically owning what had been done), for its responsibility for such participation could, of course, only apply to known and manifest sins. With Ananias and Sapphira, Christ acts as Head of the church through the Holy Spirit. Ananias and Sapphira had "lied to the Holy Ghost "; they had "lied to God," and "agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord." In Holy Writ their sin is exposed in all its awfulness.

3. CHURCH DISCIPLINE. CORINTH.

In 1 Cor. 5 we have proper church discipline as such, in its complete character, that is, Christ as Son over His own house, through His apostle of the church reminding the saints at Corinth of their responsibility to purge His house from defilement (John 2:13-17), and thus awakening them to the sense of their duty under grace to "put away from among themselves the wicked person."

The canker of party spirit had undermined the church at Corinth to such a degree that all true blessing had been nearly rendered impossible. Only a few like Stephanas and his household, and Achaicus, and Fortunatus, appeared to have kept themselves untainted with the leaven which had leavened nearly the whole lump, and made its pernicious effects felt in all directions until they extended even to the Lord's table, where many did no longer discern the body of the Lord. That terrible sin of profanity had been visited by the Lord in some cases with illness, and in others even with death.

There is a well known natural law, that the more delicate, tender, and excellent a thing is, the swifter and more complete is its corruption. For this same reason a backslider slips to a lower degree of moral degradation than many an unconverted man, committing himself to sins of which the latter would be ashamed. So it was at Corinth. The canker of party spirit with its concomitant passions of vanity, boasting, and jealousy hart so completely undermined the originally sound Christian ground in the church at Corinth, that not only were they individually puffed up within themselves but amongst themselves and one against another, the different parties comparing themselves among themselves and lifting up themselves the one above the other, instead of in lowliness esteeming one another better than themselves. The greater the pride the deeper the fall. So it came to pass at Corinth. A sin of such a shameful and unnatural character as was not known even among the Gentiles had been committed in their midst. But instead of throwing themselves with much weeping down before the Lord, like whom Ezra and those with him, who trembled at the words of the God of Israel because of the unfaithfulness of those that had been carried away, and instead of saying every one, "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our heads, and our trespass is grown up into the heavens... We have trespassed against our God... yet now there is hope... and now let us put away...", they continued to be puffed up, and "had not mourned, that he that had done this deed might be put away from amongst them."

Christ, as Son over His own house, interposed through His apostle in order to maintain both His own disregarded authority and the purity of His house. Paul, in virtue of his apostolic authority bestowed upon him by the Head of the church, was therefore obliged to write to the Corinthians. "For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath done this deed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together and my spirit, with the power of the Lord Jesus, to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."

But Paul acted here not exactly as Peter did with Ananias and Sapphira, in virtue of his apostolic authority. For at Corinth the sin to be dealt with was generally known, which was not so on the former occasion. It became therefore necessary that the church at Corinth as such in its responsibility for the holiness and purity becoming the "house of the living God," should take part in the putting away of the evil, which gave to that solemn act the character not only of apostolic but of church discipline.1 Paul therefore, whilst speaking with the full authority of an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ (as Head of the church and Son over His own house), and as an apostle of the church, "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ," at the same time as member of the church, which is the body of Jesus Christ, took his common place among them in the assembly, adding, "when ye are gathered together and my spirit, with power of the Lord Jesus Christ."

In that great and honored servant of Christ we perceive, in beautiful unison, apostolic authority, Christian humility, grace, and wisdom, to stir up the hearts and consciences of the Corinthians, so blinded by the enemy, to do that which was due to God and His Son, as Head of the church, and to obtain the desired result for God's own glory and their common blessing, and for the restoration of the fallen one.

May God grant to His church in these perilous and difficult days of decline, grace and wisdom as well as decision and faithfulness in following the example of His great yet humble apostle. In these days of religious party spirit, fleshliness and worldliness (where the exercise of true godly discipline in the fear and love of God and of Christ is rendered more difficult than ever, though none the less binding on that account) the teachers and pastors, given by the Head of the church, will (in the case of the necessity of church discipline, so sorrowful and humbling for us all) do well to remember that they are "brethren" as well as pastors and teachers. On such distressing occasions service is not rendered to sleepy consciences by addressing with quasi-apostolic authority, to arouse them from their dormant condition. This is the way to neither their hearts nor consciences. A church discipline brought about in this way will bear no "peaceable fruit of righteousness," but the very opposite. This is not the spirit of the "Son over His own house," Who washed the feet even of a Judas, before exercising discipline, nor is it the spirit of His apostle, who called himself "less than the least of the saints," and spoke even weeping "of them who were enemies of the

cross of Christ.” The way to the conscience goes through the heart, and if we do not know how to find the way to a brother's heart, we shall not find a way to his conscience (2 Peter 3:1, John 21:15-17).

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