

Chapter 8 - Humility: The Way of Truth

Redefining the Part as the Whole

There is an incident recorded in the fifth chapter of the Book of Acts concerning the sale of a piece of real estate. Had this episode taken place in our present generation, it would have had an entirely different conclusion. If some contemporary Ananias and Sapphira brought the proceeds, no doubt considerable, from the sale of their property to the elders of their church, they would likely be celebrated and applauded. The esteem in which their spirituality was regarded would increase greatly. Ananias might be assured a place on the church board or a position as an elder or a deacon. But this incident occurred in another age, in an hour when the Spirit of God prevailed in such magnitude and purity. That same act, which might well be celebrated today, resulted in sudden judgment and death. We can only suspect that the Church has moved a long distance away from the purity, power, and relentless pursuit of truth that characterized it at its inception. Thankfully, there is a God who has not changed and who is intent upon returning us to that same high standard.

But a certain man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God." And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came upon all who heard of it. (Ac 5:1-5 NAS).

Ananias and Sapphira probably brought an impressive sum. Their sin was not that they were stingy, but that they made what they gave appear to be a whole when it was only a part, however great that part may have been. We might be tempted to ask ourselves, "Was what they did really so wrong? After all, if I give a large sum, isn't that virtually the same as giving all that I have? The fact is, I am keeping back only a small portion for myself, so it isn't really a lie to say I gave all. It really is as if I had laid the whole amount that I had

in the offering basket. If some people in the church conclude from my generosity that I gave all that I had, it would be "legalistic" and "literalistic" to correct them. Anyway, compared to what others in the church are giving, my portion really is the equivalent of giving all. It represents a total amount." So the logic behind Ananias and Sapphira's act goes. They were not the last Christians to redefine the part as the whole and to justify letting it appear as such! Peter did not operate according to that sort of logic. He discerned by the Spirit of Truth, and he unmasked and confronted Ananias and Sapphira's lie. They may have succeeded in deceiving themselves, but not the Holy Spirit. Ananias and Sapphira were not only liars, but also thieves. Every liar is a thief, because every lie is a way of obtaining what is not rightfully his.

Abundant Grace and Wholeheartedness

The verses immediately before the story of Ananias and Sapphira describe a church in which,

Those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them...there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of lands or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles' feet. (Ac 4:32-35 NAS).

The Church in Jerusalem was wholehearted, and one result was that **"with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all." (Ac 4:33 NAS).** Ananias and Sapphira lived in the midst of that Church. They saw the abundant grace, the joy, and the depth of communion that was being experienced by people who had given all. They desired that abundant grace for themselves, but they failed to make the connection between such grace and the wholeheartedness of those who were experiencing it. They had seen Barnabas and others come and lay their gifts at the apostles' feet. They did the same, but only in appearance, only outwardly. They sought to obtain power, joy, and great grace by bringing only a part, in place of the whole.

We need to ask ourselves, are we doing anything different from what Ananias and Sapphira did when we seek and expect abundant grace and power, while giving ourselves only in part, while claiming to have given ourselves wholly? We all want the abundant grace,

the profound comfort, the intimate communion that acknowledging and walking in all of truth imparts, but we want it at the price of acknowledging truth only as words and doctrines. We want to speak truths but not to be true, to possess truth but not to obey it. We are bringing our partial, verbal truth and laying it at the feet of the apostolic standard and wanting our portion to be accepted as the whole! After all, isn't our orthodox, evangelical, fundamental, pentecostal affirmation really so much greater than that of so many other Christians? We may have retained a small portion for ourselves, that is, the right to exaggerate now and again, to speak a few "white" lies, to appear to be what we are not. No one is perfect, and to insist upon walking in truth is to be legalistic, after all. Therefore, the rationalizations continue with us just as with Ananias and Sapphira. The reality is that if we claim to be men and women of truth, while inwardly reserving the right to be untrue, justifying little compromises and hypocrisies, then we have presented the part as the whole and purposed in our hearts to lie to the Holy Spirit. James wrote that the violation of one commandment was the breaking of the whole law (Jas 2:10). Deciding to tolerate one deceit is to violate the whole truth. To be ninety-nine percent true and represent it as the whole truth is to lie utterly.

Truth that is not the whole truth is not the truth *at all*. The man who embraces most of the truth is not necessarily any closer to the truth than the one who affirms none of it. In fact, he may be much further from it. It is remarkable how far some people are prepared to go in acknowledging who Jesus is. They think themselves quite generous when they recognize Him as a great prophet and teacher and moral example. We tend to applaud such "openness." We are quick to become excited about how close to salvation such a person seems to be. After all, they have assented to ninety percent of the truth. How could someone have such insight, how could they grasp so many spiritual truths, and still be enemies of truth? How many Christians have felt intimidated and foolish in the presence of such a "truth-seeker," unable to insist upon that last missing portion? "Surely such a person is, in effect, as much a Christian as I am. Surely his part, being so great, being so close to the whole, really is equivalent to the whole." If we have not understood the nature of truth, we will be just so intimidated. If we do not insist upon the whole truth for ourselves, then we will falter and step back from insisting upon it for another.

Embracing the Whole Truth

To acknowledge Jesus as prophet and teacher, yet to refuse to affirm *all* that He said about Himself is to deny Him completely. Such partial acknowledgment is not to be applauded; it is cause for the greater concern because it is a partial truth offered in place of the whole. Therefore, it is a perilous deceit and a lie. Someone may be prepared to bring a very generous portion of the praise and acclaim due to Jesus and not the whole, but it is the part retained that makes all the difference.

It is that final portion of truth that decides our relationship to truth. The scripture that offends our pride, that goes against the grain of our own understanding, that is likely to offend others, is the one that matters most. That last statement, which, if finally affirmed, really gives God final authority in our lives, determines everything. Yes, I believe all that Scripture teaches, except...about hell...about judgment...about authority. Yes, I believe God is just and sovereign in all His deeds, except in this tragedy, except in this personal loss. I'll give thanks and praise to Him in all circumstances, except for this one. The issue of belief, of love, of lordship, depends not upon the belief or love or submission we find it easy to give, but upon the part we are most tempted to keep back for ourselves.

Peter said to Ananias, **"You have not lied to men, but to God."** (Ac 5:4 NAS). To whom do we think we are lying when we give ourselves in part and represent it as the whole, when we worship in part, pray in part, love in part, believe in part? **"And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came upon all who heard of it."** (Ac 5:5 NAS). It was when Ananias heard "these words" that the full magnitude of his deception broke upon him. "You have not lied only to men; you have not deceived only yourself. Your rationalizations, your self-justifications, your boasting in being a lover of truth, while refusing to assent to all that God has spoken, constitute a lie to God Himself." Does the judgment that came upon Ananias and Sapphira seem far too harsh, too severe to us? Until we perceive the magnitude of their sin, as well as our own, their judgment will remain an offense and a mystery to us. Ananias and Sapphira never denied that Christ came in the flesh. They never denied His bodily resurrection. They never contradicted a single doctrine of the faith. Yet, for their deceit they received an instant judgment. That judgment was a statement of how much value God places upon truth. That high value was communicated to the whole Church. **"Great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things."** (Ac 5:11 NAS). They were all braced and sobered by the fear that they, too,

might be carried out and buried, not for just a breach of orthodoxy, but for presenting to God a part and calling it the whole.

The Fear of the God of Truth

How many of us would like to see the Spirit of God acting as severely with those of us who have indulged in deception and half-truths in our own generation as the Spirit did in theirs? There is an absence in our generation of the "great fear" that came upon the Church in Jerusalem, an absence of the awe and trembling that filled believers who stood before a God who would not countenance a lie. It is no coincidence that this high regard for truth and this holy fear of the God of truth are not the only things missing from our generation. The very next verse begins,

Now by the hands of the apostles...numerous and startling signs and wonders were being performed among the people...there were being added to the Lord those who believed...so that they [even] kept carrying out the sick into the streets and placing them on couches and sleeping pads [in the hope] that as Peter passed by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. And the people gathered also from the towns and hamlets around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those troubled with foul spirits, and they were all cured. (Ac 5:12-16 Amplified).

The Spirit of God was present in great power to heal the sick and to bring many to repentance in the very same hour that Peter was moved by the same Spirit to confront Ananias and Sapphira. That power is absent today, and it will not be restored to the Church until the Church is restored to the standard of truth that God established in the beginning.

That men and women are not being struck dead instantly in our congregations is not a statement of God's tolerance of our deceits and lies. Judgment may not be as sudden, but it is no less certain. **"Bread obtained by falsehood is sweet to a man, but afterwards his mouth will be filled with gravel." (Pr 20:17 NAS).** How much of the esteem, the joy, the prestige, and the peace presently being enjoyed in the Church is destined to turn to gravel in our mouths? It tastes sweet at the moment. There has been no Peter to challenge us. Truth has fallen into low regard, and there is little, if any, fear of the God who hates lies in any form. "White lies" and exaggerations and subtle misrepresentations are so frequent as to be considered normal, if not even desirable and required, in the conduct of Christian life. The perverse logic of deceit is made to seem true after

all. If the ministers of God who transgress against truth are not being struck down like Ananias and Sapphira, God must have changed, or else truth has changed since the days of the Book of Acts. The reality is that God has not changed. Our lies are still killing us, only more slowly. We are starving, because the bread of deceit, no matter how sweet and plentiful, is not real food.

Every lie is an act of astonishing presumption. What must take place within my heart for me to believe that God does not discern my deceit? I must exalt my own rationalizations above the Spirit of God. Every lie is an elevation of self above truth, above the one lied to. I cannot lie to someone and still regard him as greater or even equal. The very act of lying lifts me above the one deceived; it lowers him in my sight. By lying to the Holy Spirit, Ananias and Sapphira were exalting themselves above God.

It is not surprising, then, that Peter said to Ananias, **"Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" (Ac 5:3)**. The devil was a liar from the beginning, and he is the father of lies (Jn 8:44). He is also the father of pride. His fall was an act of self-exaltation, a supreme presumption to ascend up to the level of God Himself. His pride is itself a lie, an assertion of being more than He in whom truth resides. Pride and deceit have been intimately related from the beginning. They have a common nature, a common source. It was indeed nothing less than Satan that filled Ananias' heart, just as surely as it was no one less than God to whom Ananias lied.

Every Lie has Root in the Father of Lies

Ananias' lie implied the presence and working of the spirit of the lie in his heart. Every lie has its root and inspiration in the father of lies, but the operation of that spirit in no way exonerated Ananias. In the very next verse Peter asks Ananias, **"Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart?" (Ac 5:4)**. Satan filled, and Ananias conceived. Ananias was no innocent victim; he was a full and intimate accomplice. He welcomed the deceit and willingly agreed with it. Ananias and Sapphira were no more innocent than were Adam and Eve in the garden when the serpent came and offered them the first lie: "You shall not die." They proceeded to reach up and eat the fruit that promised exaltation and equality with God. Every lie is an assertion of self, a lifting of self above truth to a level equal to the Author of truth—God Himself. It is a satanic defiance of God. Pride and presumption invite and draw to themselves the father of lies. The ground is well fertilized with

rationalizations and justifications. Once a heart is filled with such arguments, it is only a matter of time before every sort of lie is conceived. Satan comes to such a heart, and he finds much opportunity in it.

The Character of the King

When the devil came to Jesus, he found nothing in Him. Jesus was utterly true. There was nothing in Him that could receive and nurture a lie. There was no desire to exceed the bounds of truth. That yielding to the limits God has given us is true humility, and it is the essence of walking in truth. Jesus is the truth because He is perfectly and truly humble.

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself...Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. (Phil 2:3-7 NAS).

These verses describe the mystery of the incarnation of God in human flesh. They are applicable to all of us who are called sons of God. As such, we are afforded every opportunity and temptation to exalt ourselves and become arrogant. It is tempting to derive from our sonship an elevated, grand image of ourselves; therefore, we need all the more to be reminded of the character of the King and His Kingdom. Jesus came down from above and never once lifted Himself up again. **"And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Phil 2:8 NAS).** His humility was not in part. It did not stop short of totality. He refused, without reservation or limit, to defend Himself, to save some last shred of reputation and image, to spare Himself the supreme pain of rejection and misunderstanding. He was utterly true and humble. No appeal to save and exalt Himself, to the amount of "good" He could do for God, could take root in His heart. Not even the sight of pained confusion and disappointment in the faces of His followers could provoke Him to save Himself. The disgrace and humiliation of the cross was the final test, the perfection of His humility and the sealing of His character. Paul writes, **"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus." (Phil 2:5).**

How are we, as well as the world, going to recognize a people who live in all of the truth of the gospel? How will people know that we are indeed children of the King? It is neither going to be by seeing how highly we exalt ourselves, nor by the grandiose architecture of our meeting places, nor by the size and wealth of our ministries. The sure sign that we are in the truth, and in the One who is true, is that we have this attitude in us that was in Him. It is vain to boast about having the "full gospel" when you have only the smallest part of the character of the One that gospel is about.

Humility: Our Need—God's Provision

"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit." (Phil 2:3). The elimination of such motives from the heart would render one instantly true, because lying and deceit would have no ground left in which to be conceived. But how do I go about obeying such an exhortation when the temptations toward selfishness and empty conceit are so powerful and subtle and ever-present? No wonder Paul goes on to say, **"Work out your salvation with fear and trembling." (Phil 2:12).** The Amplified Bible says, **"Work out, cultivate, carry out to the goal and fully complete, your own salvation with reverence and awe and trembling [self-distrust, that is, with serious caution, tenderness of conscience, watchfulness against temptation]." (Phil 2:12 Amplified).** The requirement to be true is itself overwhelming, once it is fully grasped. The requirement to be humble and to have this mind in us that was also in Christ as the ground and basis for being true is even more exacting. There is a fearful diligence that characterizes the one who has glimpsed the subtlety and pervasiveness of his own selfishness and pride and who has sensed the real meaning and value of truth. That fearfulness and trembling heightens one's sensitivity to the presence of the stop signs of the Spirit. It heightens one's awareness of what every gesture and intonation of voice and expression of face is communicating.

"Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." (Phil 2:12-13 NAS). Knowing that it is God in us, willing and doing what pleases Himself, should cause us all the more to tremble, but the trembling that this knowledge produces is not the sort that paralyzes and drives one to despair. This ultimate source of trembling is at the same time the ultimate source of hope. As the Spirit of Truth is provided to fulfill the requirement to be true, so the Spirit of Christ—God in us—is the provision to fulfill the requirement

to be humble. God's provision is hidden to the man who still believes in his heart that he has no need of it. The one who still believes that he can be like Christ, even in Christ's humility, the one for whom the mind of Christ, like trueness of life, is still his own accomplishment and good work, is left blind to God's provision. The belief that I can attain humility is the ultimate conceit. The imitation, the simulation in my own strength of the mind that was in Christ Jesus is the ultimate act of hubris and the most vain and blasphemous of lies. It is an exaltation of self and a misconception of humility. It is the failure to see humility as a state of being to which only the Spirit of God can bring one.

Who is Sufficient?

The provision of God is reserved for the man who cries out with Paul, **"Who is sufficient for these things?" (II Cor 2:16)**. The realization that it is God in us who is willing and doing, while producing fear and trembling at the same time, produces the ultimate humility that sets us free to become true. The truth is, we cannot do it ourselves. It takes God in us to make us like Jesus, to make us true. The final salvation from the tyranny of self comes with the revelation that we cannot make ourselves humble or true. We have only to wholeheartedly desire and intend it. We cannot perfect ourselves, and what is more humbling or true than that?

We want to arise, to ascend, to go up, but we seem almost incapable of apprehending that God's path to the high place to which we aspire is one that always leads down. The realization of God in us making us true is a humbling, a lowering of our souls. Jesus came down from heaven to earth, down from divinity to washing the feet of His own disciples, down to the Jordan, down into baptism, down into disrepute, rejection, weakness and into a naked, humiliating death. **"Therefore God also highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name." (Phil 2:9 NAS)**. Every lie is a self-exaltation. Pride is capable only of reaching up. If we are to become true, then we are going to have to descend, not rise, into all the truth.

What Goes Up Must *First* Go Down

Now this expression, 'He ascended,' what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the

earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things. (Eph 4:9-10 NAS).

In the divine economy, that which goes up must first go down. Anyone who enters into the truths of God in any other way is a thief. You cannot climb over the wall. You cannot use intellect or emotion or spiritual experience to vault over it in order to obtain divine truth. Attempting to do so is itself irrefutable proof that one is an acquirer, as opposed to being a lover, of truth. The lover is the one who is drawn towards and enters through the gate of humility; he is the one who hears his Master's voice and follows Him. The Spirit of Christ leads him into all truth along a path of ever-increasing humility. Within the bounds of truth, lawfully entered, there are sufficient insights and experiences to satisfy the keenest intellect and the most sensitive soul. They are rendered benign and pure only by humility. Having this mind in us, which was in Him, is the beginning and the end of becoming true.

Jesus' Triumphal Entry

Jesus made yet another descent that is recorded in Scripture, which has come to be known as His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The word "triumphal" suggests a mile long cavalcade of cars with polished chrome gleaming, motorcycle escorts, banners streaming, and all of the accouterments of pomp and grandeur. However, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was riding on the back of the foal of a donkey, down from the Mount of Olives. The colt was so young that no one had ever sat upon it. The scene is a picture of absurdity: a loping figure, jerking and halting, a young colt with a grown man upon its back, Jesus' legs almost touching the ground. *This* was the coming of the King into Jerusalem. No gold and splendor, no trumpets, no sedan chair carried by servants. **"This took place,"** Matthew comments, **"to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, 'Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, humble, and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass.'"** (Mt 21:4-5 RSV).

The initial response of the people was to rejoice greatly even as Zechariah the prophet had said (Zec 9:9):

And those who went before and those who followed cried out, 'Hosannah! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the

Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming!' (Mk 11:9-10 RSV).

Their response proved short-lived, though. Just a short time later, Jesus stood lamenting over a Jerusalem that was rejecting Him and His Kingdom, refusing the comfort of God and leaving no expectation before itself but that of devastation and judgment:

Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!...Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' (Mt 23:37-39 RSV).

Desiring His Humility More Than His Power

Our response to God and His Spirit has not changed much since then. The power and exhilaration of the Spirit is what we first notice and respond to. We are quick to shout "Hosannah!" but very slow to recognize the implications of the humble foal that the Lord seeks out and upon which He chooses to come. Only belatedly do we begin to realize that the donkey's colt is no accident, no dispensable detail, but an inseparable part of the coming of the King. He cannot come into His Church or the world except in and by the most perfect humility. It is His nature, His very name. One can almost hear the Spirit, looking down upon the Jerusalem of this present generation, repeating Jesus' words, "You will not see Me again, not in the power and authority and reality that was in the beginning, until you can say, 'Blessed is he who comes, not in pomp but in lowliness, not in arrogance and prestige but in humility on the back of a donkey's foal, in the name of the Lord.'" If we are going to receive the Spirit of the Lord in power, without measure, then we are going to have to welcome Him and desire Him and esteem Him as lowly—and to desire His humility for ourselves more than His power. If He is not welcome in humility, then we will face the prospect of having our house left forsaken and desolate.

How is the Spirit of Christ going to come into a world desperate for reality and truth? He needs a body to indwell; He needs flesh and blood to convey the very Spirit of Jesus. We have been busy preparing ourselves with all the riches of the world. We have supposed that what He is waiting for is a Church confident of its power, able to match and outdo the world in assertiveness, grandeur, and wealth, when He has actually been waiting for a very different Church, a very different Body in which to convey Himself to

the world—a Church that most resembles a lowly donkey, a colt, the foal of an ass. We—and the world—shall not see Him again until we are willing to be that.

If at the heart of a lie is pride and arrogance, then at the heart of the truth is humility. Dishonesty is inseparable from pride; it can inhabit and express itself only through self-assertiveness, self-serving, and self-glorification. The spirit of a lie seeks out a body commensurate with its nature. It is at home with arrogance and presumption. The Spirit of Truth cannot and will not indwell and bless such a body. The disciples received the Spirit in full measure because they were brought down into humility and truth. That pattern has not been and will not be changed. All good things come down from heaven to those lowly enough to receive them. If we are waiting patiently, faithfully serving our Master in the daily, mundane requirements of life, tethered like that donkey, beside the Calvary road, Jesus will know where we are. He will call for us at the right time, and we will enter His Kingdom with Him.

The New Jerusalem

There is yet one more instance in Scripture of something coming down from above:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband...and one of the seven angels...came and spoke with me, saying, 'Come here, I shall show you the bride, the wife of the lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper...And the city was pure gold, like clear glass...And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple. And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. And the nations shall walk by its light...and nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. (Rev 21:2,9-11,18-27 NAS).

The last vision of the Church given in Scripture is of a city in which every stone is perfectly fitted to every other, and it is as clear as crystal, without the least shadow or haze. Light flows through this Church unimpeded and undistorted. It is completely visible to the world, not because it has lifted itself up, not because it has mastered

the arts of public relations and media exploitation, but because it is transparent, true, and filled with light.

It has no need of natural light. The glory of God is its illumination. And the lamp in which and through which that light shines is the Lamb of God. It is Christ in His humility, in His meekness, as the Lamb of God, who sits upon the throne and who fills the Church with living light. The light of the Church by which the nations shall walk comes through the humility of Christ. No unclean things, no abominations, and no lies can come into it. No stone that deflects light onto itself, that tries to possess and control and employ the light, or to bend and shape it for its own ends can be a part of this city. The Bride of the Lamb is without spot or wrinkle. She is free from all guile. She is humble and true. She is the glory of Christ, who is the glory of God. This is what God is preparing, stone by stone, and He will continue until He can look down upon us and rejoice to see His children walking in truth. Our destiny is to be more than merely "right." We are ordained to be filled with light. We need to set our sights on this goal, to glimpse the city descending out of heaven, and to seek the grace that is given to make us transparent stones, radiating the light and the glory and the truth of God. Amen.