

The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it – but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”

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Text

Acts 5:11-16

Topic

Great fear is associated with the Church and the apostles perform many signs and wonders – so much so that even Peter’s shadow falling on a person would heal them

Title

Don’t Pan Peter’s Shadow

Acts 5:11 So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

Acts 5:12 And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch.

Acts 5:13 Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly.

Acts 5:14 And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,

Acts 5:15 so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid *them* on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them.

Acts 5:16 Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

Introduction

There is a phobia clinic that offers treatment for *ecclesiophobia* - the fear of Churches.

Let me read you an excerpt from their literature:

Defined as "a persistent, abnormal, and unwarranted fear of churches," each year this surprisingly common phobia causes countless people needless distress. *Ecclesiophobia*... symptoms typically include shortness of breath, rapid breathing, irregular heartbeat, sweating, nausea, and overall feelings of dread, although everyone experiences fear of church in their own way and may have different symptoms. Though a variety of potent drugs are often prescribed for fear of church, side effects and/or withdrawal symptoms can be severe. Moreover, drugs do not "cure" fear of church or any other phobia. At best they temporarily suppress the symptoms through chemical interaction. The good news is that the modern, fast, drug-free processes of [our] Phobia Clinic will train your mind to feel completely different about churches, eliminating the fear so it never haunts you again.

The cost of the program is \$2500. That's enough to give you *peniaphobia* – the fear of poverty. Or maybe *harpaxophobia* – the fear of being robbed.

Setting aside any persistent, abnormal, and unwarranted phobia of Church, there should be a positive, normal, and warranted fear associated with the Church. We read in our verses that **great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things**. Nonbelievers and believers both had a healthy fear of what God was doing in the first Church.

I want to explore the fear associated with the Church. I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Your Church Should Strike Fear In Nonbelievers, and #2 Your Church Should Stimulate Fear In Believers.

#1 Your Church Should Strike Fear In Nonbelievers (v11-13)

Our verses assume you know what just occurred in the life of the first Church. A husband and wife, Ananias and Sapphira, sold a piece of property and gave the proceeds to the Church. They held back a portion for themselves. It would have been OK except that they lied and said that they were donating the entire proceeds. Given a word of knowledge, the apostle Peter confronted Ananias, telling him he had lied to the Holy Spirit. Ananias was immediately struck dead.

Three hours later Peter confronted Sapphira. She, too, lied to God and was immediately struck dead.

The result was verse eleven,

Acts 5:11 So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

The episode with Ananias and Sapphira established that God was present in the gatherings of these first Christians. Something real and powerful was happening among these people. Lives were being changed. There was therefore a reverential fear and awe of the very presence of God. This was a good fear, a healthy fear.

We need to be reminded that lives need changing and that the place to change them is Church. It is where believers have gathered together that Jesus has promised to visit with His grace and mercy. He walks in our midst, seeking to minister from heart-to-heart.

This is the first mention of the word **church** in the Book of Acts. It is the Greek word *ekklesia*, which can be translated *called out ones*. The Church consists of all those who are called out of the world by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It consists of all those who hear and heed the message of salvation by grace through faith and are born-again. It is whosoever will believe on Jesus Christ and be saved.

The verse draws a strong contrast. There is the Church, those called-out ones. And then there are those to whom God is still calling – nonbelievers described as **all who heard these things**.

It is the fear of the nonbeliever these next two verses focuses on.

Acts 5:12 And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch.

We will talk more about the **many signs and wonders** in a moment. For now we note that nonbelievers were aware of them and in awe of them.

Acts 5:13 Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly.

Nonbelievers stayed away from Church. It's opposite of what we normally think. We're always trying to get nonbelievers to come to Church. Should we change our strategy?

It's OK to invite folks to Church. What the verse is telling us is that nonbelievers understood that Church was not something you took lightly. *You could die there!* They **esteemed** the believers **highly** who were willing to put their lives on the line to serve the Lord. They understood that the believers were serious.

Your Church – **our** Church – should strike this same general fear in nonbelievers. (Hopefully without anyone having to be struck dead!). Let's look at a few of the elements that kindle this fear.

The apostles were performing **many signs and wonders**. The signs and wonders contributed to this sense of fear because God was manifesting His power through them.

There seems to be a connection between the episode with Ananias and Sapphira and this new outbreak of supernatural activity. One author described this new outbreak of signs and wonders in the first Church as the evidence of an ungrieved Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 4:30 tells us that we should not **grieve** the Holy Spirit. In the passage in Ephesians we learn that we can grieve the Holy Spirit by living like the pagans (4:17-19), by yielding to our sin nature (4:22-24), by lying (4:25), by anger (4:26-27), by stealing (4:28), by cursing (4:29), by bitterness (4:31), by being unforgiving (4:32), and by sexual immorality (5:3-5).

Individually or corporately we must grapple with whether or not we are grieving the Holy Spirit. If nonbelievers have no fear of the Church, it is at least possible (if not likely) that we are grieving Him.

The first element, then, of kindling fear is an ungrieved Holy Spirit. Another element of the fear associated with the first Church was their unity. **They were all with one accord**. Their unity was practiced in their generosity towards one another to care for the needs of one another – no matter the personal sacrifice involved.

Nonbelievers could look upon the Church and see that, if you went there, you might be stimulated to sell your worldly possessions in order to help others. That kind of generosity inspires fear.

The final element I would draw from these verses is a sense that these first Christians were genuine. They were the real deal. I say that because they continued to gather even after God struck two of them dead!

These, then, are the elements our Church needs in order to strike fear in nonbelievers: An ungrieved Holy Spirit, generosity, and genuineness.

Which leads us into our second point...

#2 Your Church Should Stimulate Fear In Believers (v14-16)

Nonbelievers will never fear Church if believers don't. Let's discuss the fear of our first century brothers and sisters.

[Acts 5:14](#) And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,

Nonbelievers wouldn't join the Church but believers were being [added](#) to it. Church isn't an organization you can join. It is an organism you are added to. You hear and respond to the good news that, though you are a sinner, Jesus has saved you. You believe, are born-again, and find yourself added to the living, growing Church.

One of the favorite New Testament metaphors to describe the Church is that it is the body of Jesus on the earth. Every believer is a 'member' of His spiritual body. Not a member like a name on a list. Think of your own physical body. Your hand, for example, is a member on your body. That's the idea.

It is truly remarkable that right after two believers were struck dead for their sin multitudes more were being added. Believers were willing to lay it all out before God. They would rather be struck dead

for lying than go on living a lie. **That** is real reverential fear – the fear of God.

Women are mentioned as being among the **multitudes** being **increasingly added to the Lord**. Women had been added previously but only now does Luke mention them. As the Book of Acts progresses gender, ethnic, and national distinctions will all be broken down. The Church is the place on earth where all are truly equal before God spiritually speaking.

Spiritual equality stimulates healthy fear. Within the Church everyone is gifted and called upon to serve the Lord and one another. I should therefore keep myself ready to serve. I've no time to slack-off. I fear failing my Lord and Master when He calls upon me to represent His grace, mercy, and love.

The many signs and wonders being done by the apostles contributed to fear associated with the Church. Some of the signs and wonders done by the apostles are further described.

Acts 5:15 so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid *them* on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them.

Peter had a route he followed every day from the upper room to Solomon's Porch. Believers lined that route with the **beds and couches** of sick individuals.

By the way: Earlier in Acts we saw that Peter came to the Temple each day at 3:00pm for the time of prayer. **So this was Peter's three-oclock shadow!**

Conservative commentators rush to point out that the verse doesn't explicitly say that people were healed by the shadow. It doesn't say it explicitly because it doesn't have to. *Of course they were healed!*

If God wants to heal people using a shadow, who are we to analyze it and criticize it?

It wasn't necessarily superstition to think Peter's shadow falling upon someone might heal them. In their culture a shadow was understood to be an extension of the person. Believing that exposure to Peter's shadow would heal was simply believing that God was healing through Peter. Whether by the laying on of his hands; or the passing of his shadow; or the speaking of a word from a distance; God was doing the healing through him and the others.

A question we have is, *Why doesn't God heal as much today?* **He does!**

First I would point out that the mention of the shadow contributes to our understanding that God sometimes does more signs and wonders than at other times. The people understood this to be an outpouring from the Lord and took full advantage of it.

Then I would suggest we need to expand our thinking about signs and wonders to include the rest of the world. If you support Gospel for Asia you received an e-mail this week that mentioned a few miraculous healings. Let me quote portions from it.

- Chantamma was a disgraced widow who sunk even lower in society when she was diagnosed with AIDS.
- Sindhubai had heard the Gospel many times and rejected it-until she had an extreme allergy problem.
- Sudhakar suffered from epilepsy, and when it worsened, he came to the verge of committing suicide.
- And Shanti's mental problems threw her parents into such depression that they, too, considered suicide.

Yet each of these people found miraculous healing when they heard about and trusted in Jesus Christ. Here's how it happened:

Chantamma's life was transformed when a Gospel for Asia missionary shared Jesus, and after a few days she was healed completely. Chantamma gave her life to Christ and is growing in Him day by day.

Sindhubai visited a prayer meeting in her brother's house and allowed the pastor to pray for her agonizing allergy. Days later, it disappeared and she received salvation.

A GFA missionary came to Sudhakar's home with the Gospel and, full of hope, Sudhakar believed, and the Lord healed him from epilepsy. Sudhakar and his wife decided to follow Jesus, and he is now in a GFA Bible college.

Shanti's family first rejected the message of GFA missionary Kumar, but slowly they started listening as he kept visiting. When Kumar and several believers prayed for 40 days, Shanti was healed and the family turned to the Lord.

Commenting on these and other genuine miraculous events, GFA says,

In these spiritually-focused cultures, people are quicker to realize who deserves the credit for miracles. Healings in these places draw people to salvation as they realize Jesus is more powerful than all their gods. The glory doesn't go to the missionary who prayed, or to the believers who fasted and sought the Lord. The glory goes to God, who touched them with love.

The flood of healing stories coming from Asia shows again the Lord's love and desire for souls to be saved. And through His mercy, thousands of people are being saved and giving glory to God.

God has not quit miraculously healing folks when it suits His purposes. Maybe He would do it more in our culture if Bible commentators didn't spend so much time trying to convince us that He doesn't heal anymore!

You also cast a shadow. Not just physically, but figuratively. Your life impacts all the other lives around you. It can influence them to the extent you are standing in the Son of God and being used to represent His character on the earth. You should fear to misrepresent Him.

Acts 5:16 Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

The author of *Acts* was Luke, a trained, board-certified physician. He distinguishes between the physically **sick** and those **tormented** by demons. Some of these people were in fact oppressed and possessed by demons. They weren't simply misdiagnosed epileptics.

Demonic oppression and possession is real. Modern science hasn't debunked it as a fiction of our previous medical ignorance. If

anything, people who are genuinely demonically tormented are the ones currently being misdiagnosed!

The point here is that even the demons feared the Church. Nothing could withstand the out-flowing of God the Holy Spirit through the Church. The very gates of Hell could not prevail against it.

The Church is a powerful gathering. It is the very body of Jesus Christ on the earth. On paper we are able to do all that Jesus did when He was on the earth.

Applying the Word...

If you are a believer, **you should be dying at Church.** You should be dying to sin and to self. When you are, the Holy Spirit is ungrieved... You are generous... You are genuine.

If you are a nonbeliever, you cannot casually join the Church. But you can be added to the Lord!

He is even now calling to you to become one of His called-out members.

Calvary Hanford
- being changed to bring change -