

Talk on Acts 4:32-5:11 by Daniel Odhiambo

I wonder what comes to your mind when you think of the word church?

It's just one of those Bible words on which we have loaded several ideas that would be so foreign to what the Bible intended.

So for a lot of people, church is a building. And so with lockdowns, and buildings not being able to be accessed- the church has been closed.

But that's probably not you.

Our passage has the first occurrence of the word church in this book, there in 5:11

And great fear came upon the whole church

The Bible picks this word from the political space, ekklesia, which basically means a gathering or an assembly. A political gathering is also called ekklesia in this same book.

A couple of weeks ago I went to the Hague to preach for one of our lecturers who is leading a Surinamese church plant.

The name of the church is De Ontmoeting, The Meeting. And I thought to myself, they gerrit.

You see, people gathering or meeting is at the very heart of what it means to be a church. It's about people.

And Luke introduces us to this word after 18 verses of providing a description of what this church looks like on the inside; sort of holding it out as a model- this is what an authentic church looks like.

So what does an authentic church look like:

1. It is built by the Apostolic witness

The first thing that strikes you in these verses is the congregational life of this church:

v.32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

v.34 that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Very striking generosity.

John Stott, author and pastor, quotes Calvin on these verses:

We must have hearts that are harder than iron if we are not moved by the reading of this narrative. In those days the believers gave abundantly of what was their own; we in our day are content not just jealously to retain what we possess, but callously to rob others.... They sold their own possessions in those days; in our day it is the lust to purchase that reigns supreme.

It's moving generosity; do you notice that they were not just giving a tenth of their monthly income- they were selling what we would call assets, investments.

Now, what these verses are not saying is that there was no private ownership of wealth. It is their attitude towards wealth that changed. They have totally lost the grip on wealth, no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own. And replaced that with a genuine concern for their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Again it was not that if you became a Christian, you had to give out all your wealth. As we will see shortly, it was voluntary and the amounts were discretionary. There were no rules. There was no compulsion.

And so there is brother, **Joseph in v36**, who was nicknamed **Barnabas**. We have no idea what need there was in the church, maybe a Corona fund. And he decides, I have some land I could sell. It was probably an inheritance from his father in law. Maybe property he bought with his retirement package. Maybe just some investment he had kept it for a rainy day, and it was just lying there year after year. We don't know! But he sells it and brings money to the apostles feet- for the use of the gospel.

The million dollar question then is, what is the secret? What builds this kind of congregational life?

A society without anyone who is poor is a very attractive idea, is it not? We all romanticize the rural life of previous generations with their communal life.

Eastern Europe tried to force this kind of communism on their people. Failed!

What was the secret of this church?

And I think it is there in v.34

v.34 With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

I wonder if you notice how odd that verse is in this section. 32 is about generosity, and 34 continues with that generosity till the end of the chapter.

And I think Luke is telling us, it is the the apostolic witness to the resurrection of Christ, the gospel, that is the secret to this congregational life.

The apostles have and their teaching is the cornerstone of this church. In the parallel passage to this, Acts 2:42-44 we also read about their commitment to the apostle's teaching, to fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers. The result

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as anyone had need.

Now the Apostles are not with us in person in 21st century Holland, but we have their writings: The Bible

Friends, what builds this kind of congregational life, what builds an authentic church- is nothing other than an unapologetic commitment to the apostolic scriptures.

We will hear more of the priority of the Word next week.

2. The authentic church is protected by God.

Now we face Ananias and Sapphira.

It's a strange story and scary one.

This couple, on the surface, does the same thing like Joseph in v36. They are generous, they sell their property; and bring the money.

However, Luke tells us that they kept back some of the money- they didn't bring the full amount. The word used for keeping back, has a sense of misappropriation. They embezzled the money. The only other place the word is used, it usually translated to steal.

It seems they had promised the church, we will sell this property and bring the money. It was voluntary, and they didn't need to bring the entire amount? Completely discretionary!

A commentator says that they were not so much misers as thieves- and above all liars. They wanted the credit and prestige of sacrificial generosity without the inconvenience of it.

All they cared about was their reputation and fattened ego.

Peter says they lie to the Holy Spirit, v3; they lie to God, v5; they conspired to test the Spirit of the Lord, v9. Very sobering!

Now the Bible is very firm with its warning against hypocrisy. We all hate hypocrisy. I hear people say they can't be Christians because they are just too many hypocrites in the church. Fair enough!

God is with you there. He hates hypocrisy. He hates people for whom what you see is not what you get.

But there's something more going on with this sin.

And I think the hint is there in v.3

Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart...

Now that should make us thinking, how strange. It is the Holy Spirit filling people in this book; and now we have someone filled with Satan.

You see, as the church has been growing, Satan has been trying to destroy this church. So far we have seen him using persecution from the government- and the religious leaders.

But now, he employs moral compromise within the church.

You see, this kind of hypocrisy is lethal poison to the congregational life that has just been described, and to any church.

The church in the West may not be experiencing the threat of physical violence and persecution, but we all know moral compromise is killing us slowly and surely.

You see the rebellion of Ananias and Sapphira against the church's communal generosity is not just you going to Albert Hein with the cash you really should have dropped in the collection box. This is a weapon of the devil to destroy the authentic church.

And I think that's true, also because of what happens to them. They both immediately fall, right before the apostle's feet where they brought the money, and immediately die. It's clearly divine judgement.

And this kind of thing is not the first in the Bible.

So think of Lev. 10 where the two sons of Aaron the high priest, Nadab and Abihu, light a strange fire on the altar. Immediately, right at the altar, the fire consumes them and they die on the spot.

Or Num 16 the story of Korah, a servant at the tabernacle, who leads a rebellion against Moses, and really against the tabernacle. They are protesting that Aaron has been made the High Priest. The earth literally opens, and consumes them.

Or think of Uzzah in 2 Sam. David is bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and the cart carrying the ark stumbles. Uzzah reaches out and holds the ark to try and help. He falls there and then and dies.

You can see the common theme in all those stories: an irreverence to God's dwelling place.

It is the same sin that Ananias and Sapphira do. They undermine the church, God's dwelling place. And God is jealously concerned about his dwelling place.

You see, when Luke tells us that there was no one who was poor in this congregation, Luke is also telling us that this congregation is the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel in Deuteronomy. This church, is God's church- where God dwells.

And God will protect his church. God will defend his church from the threats of Satan- whether external or internal.

And this is a very important time to hear this when an ugly report on an Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in the Church of England has just been released. This week we've been treated to some news from Vatican though it seems the media lied to us again. And there's been discussions on the just released Church of England statistics of church attendance etc for 2019 which shows a catastrophic decline.

Commenting on the report, a theologian blogger concludes, “The Church in its present form will have to die. It is dying.” Very difficult read.

Now that’s true, I totally agree. But something more needs to be added: the true church, built by the apostolic gospel does not die. The institutions may die. The structures may die. Buildings may be closed. But God will protect the true church.

G.K Chesterton wrote about this sort of thing, fascinated by the resurgence of religiosity after the Enlightenment. He talks about 5 historical revolutions when the church seemed to have died. Things like the enlightenment, humanist scepticism, scientific optimism/Darwinism. He calls them the 5 deaths of faith. In each of them, it seemed faith had gone to the dogs. But in each of these cases, he says- it was the dog that died.

Threats there maybe indeed, persecution from outside or moral compromise from inside. But be encouraged, God will protect the church.