

Hedging Bets: A Theological Reading of Acts 4:32-5:11

by Kevin Beck , Aug 26, 2004

The first seven chapters of the book of Acts chronicle the exhilarating days of the earliest church. On the initial Pentecost after Christ's resurrection, the city of Jerusalem was filled with both Palestinian Jews and "God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). Acts 2:9-11 lists Jews and proselytes who had arrived from no fewer than fifteen geographical regions ranging from Mesopotamia to Rome.

The apostle Peter stood before the crowds and warned them, "Be saved from this perverse generation" (Acts 2:40). Three thousand people gladly responded to Peter's message and thus began the Jerusalem church. This group continued to blossom as "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

Despite the apparent success, all was not rosy. As the size of the congregation increased, the temple elites noticed the new movement's growth and arrested the church's leaders for proclaiming "in Jesus the resurrection of the dead." Peter and John underwent trial, imprisonment, and flogging. However, the church continued to swell. "The number of men came to be about five thousand" (Acts 4:1-4). The Jerusalem church was the original mega-church.

Acts fails to provide any detailed demographic information concerning the economic classes of the church's constituency. Yet the Gospels tell us that Jesus found mass appeal among the underclass of society—the poor, the diseased, the outcasts. There is no reason to believe that the Jerusalem church did not find a large contingent of these folks in their ranks.

Additionally, a sizeable number of the pilgrims to Jerusalem who had accepted Peter's proclamation apparently remained in the city. Most of them would have intended originally to return home following the holy days. Now they believed that they had come to know the Messiah's identity in Jesus of Nazareth, that "the times of refreshing" would come soon, and that God would "send Jesus Christ." They joined themselves to this newly-formed eschatological community waiting for the "universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets" who had previously foretold of "these days" (Acts 3:18-26, NRSV). Many of these Diaspora Jews likely planned to remain in Jerusalem until the consummation of the ages; hence, they needed some means of support as they anticipated the kingdom's full arrival.

Meanwhile, both groups—the indigenous poor and the pilgrims from the Diaspora—needed to eat. To address this situation the church practiced radical egalitarianism. All who believed "had all things in common and sold their possessions, and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (Acts 2:44-45). They were "of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common" (Acts 4:32). Communalism alleviated the necessities of the poor and expressed the early church's concern for equity as the Levitical code required. "And if one of your brethren becomes poor and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help

him" (Leviticus 25:35).

Symbolically, the church's sharing articulated their eschatological belief that the new Exodus had begun. The Mosaic generation, after leaving Egypt, collected manna for the community and allocated portions according to individual necessity. "He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack. Every man had gathered according to each one's need" (Exodus 16:18). Just as everyone was taken care of during the original Exodus, everyone would be attended to now in the new Exodus.

Moreover, the Jerusalem church led by the apostles who originally traveled with Jesus followed Jesus' eschatological imperative to provide for the helpless. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus foretold of the arrival of the Son of Man in glory. Echoing Daniel 7, the enthroned human figure would pronounce judgment on the sheep and goats. The judge permitted the sheep to "inherit the kingdom" (Matt. 25:34) because they fed the hungry and housed the stranger. Christ's sermon was less than two months old when the church originated on Pentecost. So, the benevolent obligation was fresh on the apostles' collective mind. Practicing what Jesus preached from the Mount of Olives took concrete form for the church that carefully followed the apostles' doctrine.

As the church's generosity abounded, folks with possessions sold them and distributed the proceeds. Even the landed classes ridded themselves of their property and donated the profits to relieving the needy. "All who were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need" (Acts 4:34-35).

The Land of Israel

For an ancient Israelite, selling land was no mere real estate transaction. This was *promised* land—land pledged and given by God to the fathers of Israel. To this day, the territory in question is popularly known as *The Holy Land*.

God vowed to Abraham, "To your descendants I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7). As the Exodus ended and Israel prepared to cross the Jordan, the Lord spoke to Moses, "To these the land shall be divided as an inheritance" (Numbers 26:53 and 33:54). Israel took the land under Joshua's generalship. "So the Lord gave to Israel all the land which He had sworn to give their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it" (Joshua 21:43).

The entire nation, each tribe, and every family received from God a special plot of land to be kept in perpetuity throughout the generations. The land of Israel itself took on eschatological importance. Israel's prophets looked forward to a time when God would "open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves and bring you into the land of Israel" (Ezekiel 37:12). At that point, "everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid" (Micah 4:4). Subsequently, a belief arose "according to which the bones of those buried outside the Holy Land would roll through underground tunnels in order to arrive there for the resurrection."[\[1\]](#)

Adherence to the land fueled second-temple Jewish patriotic hopes and revolutionary fervor. In the time of the Maccabean revolt, Simon the High Priest released Israel "from the gentile yoke." Simon "extended the nation's territories, and made himself master of the whole land." Israel thereafter "farmed their land in peace, and the land produced its crops, and the trees in the plains their fruits." Moreover, Simon "restored peace to the land...each man sat under his own vine and fig tree, and they had no one to fear...every enemy was vanquished from the land" (1 Maccabees 13:41-14:13).

Luke's gospel opens with Joseph and Mary returning to their ancestral Bethlehem home to partake in the demeaning census ordered by the Roman overlords for taxation purposes. Another tax on estates prompted Judas the Galilean to revolt in 6 AD.^[2] The zealot movement which initiated the Roman-Jewish War of AD 66-74 engaged in mock trials of the wealthy resulting in the confiscation of their property^[3].

In this milieu of intense concern for the land, willing abandonment of one's inherited property struck at the very heart of what nationalistic Judaism considered to be the quintessential characteristic of participating in the eschatological kingdom of God. Selling one's land was tantamount to foregoing one's place in Israelite society, rejecting the gift of God, and renouncing the resurrection.

So, when the earliest church members put their property and houses on the market, they relinquished their portion in the promised land of Israel and all of its supposed accompanying blessings. Vending one's real estate on the basis of a commitment to the Jesus-centered eschatological community was a public statement announcing to all Israel that the kingdom of God would arrive in a hitherto unexpected way, a way not tied to the land but grounded in Christ Jesus of Nazareth.

Max King, founder of Transmillennialism™, points out that the New Testament "focus is on Christ, a person, not on a piece of real estate. Instead of using the Old Testament phrase 'in the land,' Paul consistently uses the phrase 'in Christ'".^[4] Those "who were loyal to Christ's kingdom-agenda, would have to be prepared to renounce them [property and family]."^[5] The apostles knew this well.

During their time with Jesus, the apostles had witnessed and experienced his call to abandon their possessions and follow him—and "the most basic possession was land."^[6] They themselves left their nets and offices and followed Jesus (Luke 5:11, 28). They knew that the Son of Man owned no property and had nowhere to lay his head (Luke 9:58). They heard Jesus instruct, "Sell what you have and give alms" (Luke 12:33). They recalled the story of the rich man who fared sumptuously every day while poor Lazarus begged for crumbs at the doorstep of his house. In the end, Lazarus was justified while the rich man was rejected (Luke 16:19-31). They remembered Jesus' instruction to the rich young ruler to sell everything, distribute to the poor, and follow him (Luke 18:18-23).

After counseling the rich young ruler, Jesus announced, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" The apostles demurred wondering who then

could be saved. At that point, Peter boldly pronounced, "See, we have left all and followed you." Jesus assured him, "I say to you, there is no one who has left house...for the sake of the kingdom of God who shall not receive many times more in this present time and in the age to come everlasting life" (Luke 18:24-30).

For Jesus, leaving one's possessions, especially real estate, in favor of him was a sure sign of membership in the messianic kingdom. Jesus, consequently, redefined kingdom participation as being rooted in him, not in the *land* of Israel. This counterintuitive move radically separated the early church from both traditional Israelite theology and other messianic movements.[\[7\]](#)

Barnabas, Ananias, and Sapphira

One prominent Jerusalem church member was Joseph. As a Cypriot Levite, he was a Diaspora Jew and a member of the Israelite priestly class. Like so many others in the Jerusalem church, Joseph sold his ancestral land "and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4:36-37). It was a bold move by a Levite who knew the Law of Moses. To belong to a messianic league was one thing, but to renounce ownership of a God-given possession in favor of that community equaled heresy. If he were correct in his faith concerning Jesus of Nazareth as being the Christ and discarding his territory, then he would inherit something far greater than land; namely, eternal life. However, if he were wrong he would be violating the will of God and potentially forfeiting his place in the eschatological kingdom (Ezekiel 48:12-14). It was a risky wager for Joseph, and the apostles knew it. His act bolstered the spirits of the Jerusalem church so much that Joseph became known as Barnabas, Son of Encouragement.

Immediately following the introduction of Barnabas, the book of Acts presents a husband and wife who both belonged to the Jerusalem church, Ananias and Sapphira. Like Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira sold a certain possession. However, they conspired to retain some of the proceeds for themselves. When Ananias presented the ostensibly full amount to the apostles, Peter inquired, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of land for yourself?" Peter indicted Ananias, "You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:3-4). Immediately, Ananias fell dead.

Soon thereafter, Sapphira entered the place ignorant of her husband's demise. Peter questioned her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" Sapphira confirmed the amount. Apparently irked, Peter inquired, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?" She, like her husband, fell down dead (Acts 5:7-10).

Traditionally, sermons arising from Acts 5 point to Ananias and Sapphira as examples of greed and pride. Preachers caution stingy audiences neither to withhold their checks from the offering plate nor seek to appear to be more generous than they truly are. Few, if any, sermons ever overtly promise death to the greedy and the proud.

Being struck by God seems like a harsh sentence. Even if Ananias and Sapphira's

motivation were to appear more generous than they really were, the death penalty seems awfully severe for lying. What could have caused such a serious divine reaction?

Obviously something besides greed or pride motivated Ananias and Sapphira to retain some of the proceeds of their land sale. Unlike Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira hedged their bets.

The Law of Moses provided for the redemption of sold property. If a person sold his inheritance, he retained the right of redemption *pro rata*. "Let him count the years since its sale, and restore the balance to the man to whom he sold it, that he may return to his possession" (Leviticus 25:27). In other words, anyone could buy back his own portion of the Holy Land.

Feasibly, Ananias and Sapphira remained unsure of the viability of the Jesus movement. Everything sounded good and the group was growing, but what if things did not pan out? What if the persecutions grew worse and this messianic movement was snuffed out like so many previous ones?

By donating only a portion of the earnings to the church (we're not told what percentage they gave and how much they kept), Ananias and Sapphira could ensure their place in the kingdom of Jesus Christ if things worked out. By selling their property, they would renounce ownership in the land and follow Jesus. However, if the church floundered and eventually sputtered out, they would still retain the means by which they could redeem their ancestral property. It seemed like a no-lose proposition. Hedge your bets, and you can't lose.

Well, Ananias and Sapphira lost.

When addressing them, Peter reminded them that they were under no obligation to sell their ancestral property. They were free to keep it if they wished. They could have retained their property and their doubts about Jesus and the church, and no one would have been the wiser. One could keep his land and still be part of the church. In fact, it would be naive to think that some did not do this very thing. So why make an example out of Ananias and Sapphira?

Jesus provided a three-fold admonishment concerning the land and following him in Luke 9:57-62. First, he confessed that the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head. In other words, the messianic messenger himself renounced all adherences to the land of Israel as a divine right. Those who were to follow him should not expect any payment in property.

Second, anyone wishing to share in the messiah's reign must abandon the hope of burial in the land as a down payment of resurrection. "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God."

Third, Jesus forbade bidding farewell to those in his house. Instead, set your hand to the

plow and till the fertile soil of God's kingdom.

Unlike Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira demonstrated that they would not follow Jesus wherever he would go. They would not let the dead bury the dead. They set their hand to the plow, but they were looking back.

Jesus taught that "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13). Ananias and Sapphira did not fully invest in the kingdom of God as announced by Jesus.

But was that enough to warrant death?

It was for the prophet Isaiah who pronounced doom on those who invested their hopes in real property rather than the real God. "Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field...Sheol has enlarged itself and opened up its mouth beyond measure; their glory and their multitude and their pomp, and he who is jubilant shall descend into it" (Isaiah 5:8-14).

The prophetic tradition continually warned Israel against trusting in the land. "They cover fields and take them by violence, also houses, and seize them." The end result for the land-hungry would be death. They would cry, "We are utterly destroyed! He has changed the heritage of my people. How he has removed it from me! To a turncoat He has divided our fields." The prophet summarized, "Therefore, you will have no one to determine your boundaries by lot in the congregation of the Lord" (Micah 2:2-5).

Of course, the most significant piece of Israelite property was the temple itself. The prophets cautioned Israel against relying upon this hallowed piece of real estate as a sure sign of God's favor and ultimate deliverance. "Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord'" (Jeremiah 7:4).

Jesus likewise instructed his hearers to divest themselves from the temple and its grounds. As he sat on the Mount of Olives, some of his disciples pointed to the glory of the site. Jesus corrected them saying, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down" (Mark 13:2). If one placed his kingdom hopes on the Jerusalem temple, he would surely be disappointed because it was allotted to come crashing down.

Jesus regularly redefined the meaning and position of the temple. Ultimately for him, the temple was not a structure of stones and mortar but of spirit. In John 2:19-22, Jesus promised, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Perplexed, the crowds wondered how this would be possible. However, Jesus spoke of "the temple of His body."

Following his famous sermon on the mount (Matthew 7:24-27), Jesus concluded with the remarks, "Whoever hears these sayings of Mine and does them, I will liken him to a wise

man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on the house; and it did not fall for it was founded upon the rock." In the ears of an ancient Hebrew, a wise man building a house on the rock echoed of Solomon, the Son of David, constructing the temple. Here, Jesus superimposed his teachings and loyalty to him as tantamount to temple building. Put succinctly, 'Don't trust in the structure in Jerusalem. Trust in what I am saying.'

In contrast, "Everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall."

Comparing the fleshly ordinances of the Mosaic system with the spiritual way of the New Covenant, Paul writes on a similar theme in Romans 8:2. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death." Whereas the law ended in death, Christ ended in life. Remaining tied to the law and not progressing into messianic life meant death to the zealous adherents of the Torah. "For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace (Rom. 8:6).^[8] Accordingly, Peter's accusation of Ananias lying to the Spirit refers to his remaining in covenant with death while deceptively appearing to be forging ahead toward the consummation of the kingdom. Ananias seemed to be in the Spirit while he actually remained in the flesh.

This brings us back to Barnabas and his contrast with Ananias and Sapphira. By selling all of his inherited possessions, Barnabas confessed his faith in, and commitment to, Jesus as messiah. He relinquished his entire claim to his ancestral property as an entitlement to participation in God's eschatological kingdom. In this sense, Barnabas was spiritually minded, setting his mind on things above.

Ananias and Sapphira remained planted in the Old Covenant and the things of the flesh. Since the Old Covenant was a ministry of death, the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira served as a theological warning to the others of the Jerusalem church and the earliest readers of Acts to press forward toward the fullness of the New Covenant of life (2Corinth. 3:6-18). Similarly, the book of Hebrews warns, "We are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul" (Hebrews 10:39).

Finally, the contrast between Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira serves as a theological statement concerning covenantal transformation and the possession and ownership of the property on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Jesus Christ reoriented the nature of Israel's landed inheritance from being in the land to being in him. Barnabas exemplifies those who received the New Covenant's messianic kingdom while Ananias and Sapphira personify those who remained with the old and fatally passed away.

End Notes

[1] N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p194.

[2] Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 20.5.2.

[3] Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 4.5.4

[4] Max King, "Israel and the Promise," *The Living Presence*, Vol. 3, No. 4, November 1992. p5. See also Max King's article, "The Seed and Land Promise: What Abraham Saw," *The Living Presence*. Vol. 5, No. 6. January 1995.

[5] N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p.405.

[6] *Ibid*, p.403.

[7] It also opened the door for non-proselyte Gentiles to partake in the kingdom on equal footing with natural-born Jews. Compare Romans 4:11-16. See also Max King's article at www.presence.tv/cms/premillennialism.php

[8] "Spiritual" is a category referring to New Covenant realities contrasts against "flesh" as a category referring to Old Covenant shadows.

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