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Series: [The Anatomy of a Church](#)

The Anatomy of a Church (10)

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[Acts 20:28](#)

(Continuation from 02/09/14)

PERSONAL HOLINESS

The church has always had need for confronting the sins of its people. During its early days many foreign visitors to Palestine were converted to Christ and decided to stay in or near Jerusalem in order to enjoy the fellowship of believers there. A large number of native Jewish converts were ostracized from their families and lost their jobs because of their new-found faith. To help support those needy brothers and sisters, many of whom were virtually destitute, the believers who had property and possession sold them and gave the proceeds to the apostles, who **“distributed to each, as any had need”** ([Acts 4:35](#)). That practice was the spontaneous reaction of generous, Spirit-filled hearts to meet the practical needs of fellow Christians.

During that time, a couple named Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of their property and pledged to God that they would give all the proceeds to the apostles for use in the church. Somewhere in the process, however, they decided to keep back a portion of the pledged money for themselves. In order not to appear less generous than their fellow believers, however, they falsely reported that they were giving the full amount. When the Lord revealed the duplicity to Peter, he first confronted the husband. **“Ananias,”** he asked, **“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.”** Several hours later, Sapphira came to the apostles, not knowing what had happened to her husband. When Peter asked her if the property was sold for the price claimed by her husband, she confirmed his lie and suffered his fate. Not surprisingly, **“great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things”** ([Acts 5:1-11](#)).

The selfishness of Ananias and Sapphira was deplorable, but their great sin was in lying about what they had done, not only to the church but to God. In this particular case in the early church, God took discipline directly into His own hands and demonstrated before all how sin is to be dealt with by removing the offenders from the church and from the earth! The purity of the church not only was protected by making God’s people more fearful of sin but also by helping to keep out of the fellowship those who were not true believers ([Acts 5:13](#)).

Even in apostolic times, such direct and severe divine intervention in chastening apparently was rare, although Paul reports that some of the Corinthian believers became weak, ill, and even died as the result of gross immorality and disregard for the sacredness of the Lord’s Table ([1 Corinthians 11:30](#); cf. [1 John 5:16-17](#)). God has not changed His

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attitude about sin or about purity. He is every bit as much concerned for the holiness of His people today as He was when the church was born. Sin has to be dealt with or it will destroy both those who practice it and those who tolerate it. God may still act in supernatural ways to purge the church, but He has primarily given that responsibility to the church itself. The church must be “self-policing” with regard to sin. The horrendous scandals that have tarnished the church recently reflect the abysmal failure of believers to confront sinning leaders and followers. The world often has had to expose what the church tried to cover up.

1 Peter 1:14-16 (NASB)

¹⁴ **As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance,**

¹⁵ **but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior;**

¹⁶ **because it is written, “YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY.”**

True holiness has a negative aspect. It is experienced when believers are **not** being **conformed to the former lusts**. **Conformed** means “to be shaped by” or “fashioned after” (cf. [Romans 12:2](#); [Ephesians 4:20-24](#)).