

Early Converts Who Sinned

Beginning in Jerusalem on Pentecost the number of disciples multiplied fast. It was an exciting and happy time. They were finding favor among all the people. No doubt, there were some, if not all, of these immature babes in Christ who were sinning by various offenses. The record calls attention to the sin of one man and his wife, Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).

It was the popular thing among them to sell possessions and to share all things with others. This couple sold a piece of property, kept back a portion of the proceeds, and laid the remainder at the apostles' feet. They sinned in indicating that they were giving the whole amount. Because of their deceit and hypocrisy, both Ananias and Sapphira were stricken down dead before all the assembly.

That offense may not seem to be a "capital case" to us. Why was no attempt made to bring them to repentance and forgiveness? The recorded facts are few. It may be that they had been dealt with but refused to make correction. Perhaps, they were notable and were marring the image of the church. Anyway, they met with capital punishment. Peter did not excuse them with words like, "You let the fleshly man sin, but your spirit is saved because Jesus saved you on the cross." This is the first example of a convert falling into sin. A drastic, public example was made of it indicating to all that the church was not approving and harboring hypocrites even though they were well-known and "big givers." And the awesome demonstration was effective, for "great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard these things."

Today, many will assert that the couple was never truly converted, but that cannot be read into the record. That is an evasion of the truth that a child of God can sin so as to lose his salvation.

The second record of a convert sinning is seen in Acts 8:4-24. Philip had gone down to Samaria and "*proclaimed to them Christ. And the multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip...*" "*But there was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the nation of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all gave heed to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, 'This man is that power of God which is called Great.'*" "*But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip.*" Nothing should be read into this text to cast doubt on the sincerity of Simon. His sincerity is emphasized by his willingness to give up his place of fame among the Samaritans. He quit his sorcery, for Luke records that he had "previously practiced magic."

Later, Peter and John went among the Samaritan converts laying hands on them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. The miraculous demonstrations outclassed Simon's previous tricks of magic. It appealed to him in his most vulnerable area as a babe in Christ. So, he offered money to buy that power from the apostles -- a big mistake! Peter invoked, "*Your silver perish with you!*" My Mom would not have allowed such "religious cussin'"! Phillips says he translates that properly as "To hell with you and your money!" It was no indifferent matter or insignificant sin. A great distinction had to be kept between the works of the Holy Spirit and the works of sorcery/magic. This was not just a sin of the flesh, either, for Peter told him, "Your heart is not right before God." He was in the "gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."

He had sinned grievously, but he was not stricken dead as were Ananias and Sapphira. Mercy was still available for him, but to receive it he must "*Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven.*" It is of great comfort to know that this man humbled himself again, pleading, "*Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.*"

It is of great comfort also to us to know that, when we succumb to evil intent and wickedness and are in the bond/enslavement of iniquity, we can also humbly repent and pray with assurance that we will be accepted by God. Preachers during my youth called this "the second law of pardon." Peter had told those penitent ones on Pentecost to repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins and to receive the gift of the Spirit. But those are not the instructions Peter gave this man who sinned after first receiving remission of his sins.

Surely, this incident is recorded for more reason than a human interest story. It plainly indicates that a child of God can sin grievously so as to lose his soul if he does not repent of his evil intentions and misdeeds. It is sad that theologians have formulated different theories and have tried to twist this plain truth to fit their assumptions. Some who believe that a child of God cannot sin so as to lose his salvation declare that Simon and Ananias were not sincere when they believed and submitted to baptism. But where did they find that bit of information? If that were true, Peter would have been obliged to tell Simon to repent and be baptized. Instead, Peter told him to repent and pray for forgiveness, an instruction he never gave to an unconverted person.

Need I review here the long list of warnings by Jesus and the inspired writers against leaving the walk with the Lord and embracing the life of the flesh? If one cannot renounce his faith (which he cannot renounce if he never had it in the first place), then those warnings and enumerations of the damning sins become as foolish clutter in the Scriptures. It is true that, if we walk by the spirit instead of the flesh, we will not practice those sins, but that is a conditional "if" indicating the strong and dangerous possibility that we can choose the fatal course and be denied entrance into the kingdom of God (See Gal. 5:16-24).

Yes, a child of God can sin becoming enslaved to iniquity just as surely as Adam, a son of God (Luke 3:38), sinned and was driven from the presence of God. He did this while the serpent was assuring him, “*You shall not surely die!*” How tragic that pulpiteers proclaim that satanic message today instead of informing offenders in Peter’s words to “*repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.*” Which message offers the more true comfort and hope? The penitent, prayerful disciple lives in peaceful assurance.

(Cecil Hook: March 2003) []