

# Lying To The Holy Spirit

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What a time to be alive! Jesus had just recently died and rose again, and on Pentecost, He had sent the Holy Spirit to the apostles. From that point, the church had grown incredibly—by the thousands! And oh, what a spirit of accord! The church was united, and as Christ had taught, they were freely sharing their blessings with one another (Acts 4:32).

Many who owned lands or houses were selling them, and the church distributed the proceeds to those who were in need (verses 34-35). One of these was Joses, surnamed Barnabas by the apostles, who sold his land and gave the entire price to the fledgling church (verses 36-37). Generosity and Christian love were so evident in these early believers.

One couple, Ananias and his wife Sapphira, decided to sell one of their possessions (Acts 5:1). Though seeming to give all the proceeds to the apostles, they kept back part of it for their own use (verse 2). But they could not fool God; He knew what they had done. More importantly, He knew their hearts.

By His Spirit, God made the apostle Peter aware of their attitude as well. Thus Peter asked, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" (verse 3). For their sin, Ananias and Sapphira both died that same day. What a shock this was to the newly founded church (verse 11)!

## **Parallel Verses**

In itself, this event so early in the life of the church is very instructive about the attitude that God requires of us and about how serious He is about His children living by His every word. But trinitarians use Peter's question as "proof" that the Holy Spirit is a divine being. They say, "One cannot sin against an attribute. One cannot lie to something that is not sentient. Thus, the Holy Spirit must be a personality within the Godhead." But is their reasoning true? Or are they so busy looking for "proof" to fit their theory that they have ignored the plain meaning of Peter's words and the overwhelming evidence of other scriptures?

On the surface, this argument seems plausible. It does seem a stretch to think that one could lie to a thing, whether it be an object or a power or an attribute. Normally, we would not use the language this way. However, when writing about the Holy Spirit, the apostles had no reservations about interchangeably using verbs associated with things rather than people.

For example, Paul tells Timothy "to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear . . ." (II Timothy 1:6-7). We usually stir liquids and mixtures, not people. Several writers use the verb "pour" to describe God's use of the Spirit (see Isaiah 32:15; 44:3; Ezekiel 39:29; Joel 2:28-29; Zechariah 12:10; Acts 2:17-18, 33). A person cannot be poured.

On the other hand, many verses show that the Holy Spirit "speaks," "tells," "declares," "convicts," "guides," "hears," and others. By themselves, these verbs can give us no conclusive proof that the Holy Spirit is or is not a divine being.

To understand what Peter meant by "to lie to the Holy Spirit," we must see if the context explains what he meant. At the end of Acts 5:4, Peter makes a parallel accusation: "You have not lied to men but to God." "God" is translated from *theos*, the general Greek word for deity. In the broadest sense, Peter accuses Ananias of sinning against God (see Genesis 20:6; 39:9; Leviticus 6:2; Psalm 51:4).

When he speaks to Sapphira later on in the scene, Peter repeats the accusation in a slightly different way: "How is it that you have agreed together to test [*tempt*, KJV] the Spirit of the Lord?" (Acts 5:9). Here, Peter uses "Lord" from the Greek *kurios*, meaning "master" or "lord." In this verse the Holy Spirit is shown to be the possession of God.

Thus in these three parallel verses, Peter clarifies what he meant: Ananias and Sapphira had tried to deceive God, who was present in them and in the apostles by the power of His Spirit. Did they not realize, Peter asks, that through His Spirit God knew not only what they were doing, but also their hearts?

### **The Whole Bible**

But why did Peter make it seem as if the Spirit had personality? Because as the means, the power, the vehicle, the agency, by which the Father and the Son accomplish their will (for example, creating—Genesis 1:2), the Spirit takes on properties that they have. We do this in our own speech and writing: Money talks. Power corrupts. Words bite. To describe actions of things, we often use verbs that more accurately describe human actions. Wind moans or shrieks. Fire licks wood. Rain dances. Water runs. These words do not make the things human.

In Romans 5-7 Paul personifies death, law and sin. "Death reigned from Adam to Moses" (Romans 5:14). "The law has dominion" (7:1). "Sin . . . deceived me, and by it killed me" (7:11). We know that none of these things has personality, and we think nothing more of it. The same applies to the Spirit of God. Just because we use verbs that normally describe the actions of a person does not mean that the subject is a person. It is a non-argument; it means nothing.

More important is how the entirety of the Bible treats the concept of God's Spirit. Using one verse like Acts 5:3 to "prove" a doctrine is called "proof texting." This method violates two of the paramount points of biblical understanding: 1) *Always use clear verses to explain unclear verses*, and 2) *gather all of the pertinent verses from the whole Bible and study them completely before reaching a conclusion on a doctrine*.

Acts 5:3 is an unclear verse on the nature of the Holy Spirit, and it must stand in the light of verses from other parts of the Bible before it is correctly understood. For instance, nowhere in the Bible is the Holy Spirit shown to have manlike shape. The Father and the Son are revealed to have body parts like us—they even sit on thrones—but the Spirit is described to be like wind, oil, fire and water.

The only shape it is ever given is that of a dove (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32), and some dispute that the Spirit *looked* like a dove but rather in a visible form *descended* like a dove. Nevertheless, the Spirit is never described to have a humanlike shape. Man was created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27), so man looks like God. If the Spirit were also a person in a "trinity," it too would look like a man just as the Father and Son do (John 14:9). Yet, at best, the Spirit had a dove's shape in one instance, and a man and a dove have never been mistaken for each other.

Other verses show the apostles giving praise, glory and honor to the Father and Son without mentioning the Spirit (Romans 1:7; I Corinthians 1:1-4; Galatians 1:1-5; and so on through the epistles). If it were part of the Godhead, this would be a grave omission.

Many of the Spirit's attributes can be shown to originate in the Father or the Son. For example, the Spirit is named "Comforter" in John 14:26 (KJV), yet the Father is called "the God of all comfort" in II Corinthians 1:3-4. Other examples include making intercession: Romans 8:26—I Timothy 2:5 and Hebrews 7:25; and enabling spiritual understanding: I Corinthians 2:10—I Corinthians 2:16 and I John 5:20.

In addition, the Spirit has no familial relationship to Christians. God is our Father and Christ is our Elder Brother. Paul says "Jerusalem above . . . is the mother of us all" (Galatians 4:26). The Spirit, though, is not a person but a gift of God, the mind and power of God working in and through us (II Timothy 1:7).

Finally, the history of the trinity doctrine is open knowledge. The true church never accepted the idea, and even the false church did not embrace it until three centuries after Christ! Even then, it was only accepted as a political concession to the Roman emperor, Constantine. Add these facts to its absence in the Scripture, and it is no wonder the Catholics and Protestants call it a mystery!

### **The Lesson of Acts 5:1-11**

Peter is not the only one who mentions sinning against the Spirit. Isaiah writes, "But [Israel] rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; so He turned Himself against them" (Isaiah 63:10). The antecedent of "He" is easily seen as "the LORD" (verse 7). Stephen seems to be referring to this verse in Acts 7:51, as does Paul in Ephesians 4:30.

Clearly, it is possible to sin against the Holy Spirit. Ananias and Sapphira lied to it, or more correctly "attempted to deceive by falsehood," as some lexicons read. What does this mean? How did they lie to the Spirit?

For starters, they were hypocritically appearing to do good while committing a very selfish act. They wanted the members of the church to see how concerned and generous they were—and on the sly make a bit of a profit. Jesus strongly condemned this kind of hypocritical behavior in the Pharisees (Matthew 23:25, 27-28).

They also tried to deceive God. Did they think He was so much like them that He would not notice they were trying "to pull the wool over" His eyes? As the omniscient Judge of all (Ecclesiastes 11:9), He sees and hears everything by the power of His Spirit (Psalm 139:1-12). Almost as if he were thinking of this couple's sin, Paul writes,

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.  
For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. (Galatians 6:7-8)

God must have considered their sin to be of such a heinous nature that He immediately took their lives. Such sudden death evokes memories of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10), and of Uzzah (II Samuel 6:1-7), whom God slew immediately for their sins. He may have made such a tragic example of Ananias and Sapphira to stun the young church into thinking about how serious the

Christian calling is (Acts 5:11). Christianity is not for those who are unwilling to commit their *whole* lives to overcoming human nature and growing to the high standard of Jesus Christ. The stakes are too high for us to treat His calling lightly.

Acts 5:1-11 means so much more than just a trinitarian proof text. It records an event that made a lasting, sobering impression on the church of God. By that event, we know how vital it is for a called son of God to dedicate his whole life to serving God and the church. Unlike Ananias and Sapphira, we cannot "keep back" any part of our lives from God. He redeemed us, and our lives and all our possessions are His.

It is good for us to recall Paul's advice in Romans 12:1: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." If we do this, we will never have to worry about lying to the Holy Spirit.