

Which Ananias?

Different approaches to being spiritual

In memory of brother Ulrich Weck of Berlin (1930-2003).
A lover of Christ and His people, a tireless worker, a saint of conviction, a happy man.
An inspiration to those of us who follow.

In a free society, religious life is optional. As in any modern supermarket, the western client may choose his brand of "faith" and also the degree of intensity to which he is willing to adhere to it. We believe that no person comes to a true Christian faith unless the Holy Spirit of God works in his heart. Observing the apostle Paul's evangelistic methods, we learn that there is also an intellectual element in conversion: "he **explained** and **declared**... and **tried to convince** them about Jesus" (Acts 28:23). Conversion to Christ has moral and lifestyle implications. In his defence before king Agrippa, the apostle declared "I preach that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their **deeds**" (Acts 26:20). It is impossible to yield to Christ and "just live a good life like everybody else". A Christian engineer should be different from all other engineers. Christian teachers, nurses, business people, homemakers, cooks and shop keepers must also be different. But different in what way?

Once a new convert joins the Christian community, he searches for models of spirituality. How does Christ expect him to live his new found faith? In time, the new believer will usually become like those Christians around him. Will he be a materialist believer? A carnal fun seeking saint? Will he be intellectually lazy or alert? Will he develop an evangelistic or a defensive mind set? Will he ever enjoy true communion with Christ this side of death? Or will he end his life exhausted, running from one religious activity to the next, spurred on by the admiration of fellow saints! Given our corrupt sinful nature, in any choice we are inclined towards the vices. In the New Testament we find 3 men named Ananias. They were contemporaries. Each, independently, for his own reasons, chose "faith in God" against being an atheist. Further more, each evidenced personal sacrifice as they lived in their God fearing community. Yet, each displayed a different approach to being spiritual.

Ananias - the Shallow Approval-Seeker

We find these 3 men in the book of Acts. The first Ananias appears in chapter 5. He is a fairly wealthy man married to Sapphira, joined the early church at a very exciting time. Yes, there was some persecution around, but there was great boldness, togetherness and the Hand of God was evident among them. Can you imagine living in a community where "no-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had"? (4:32). At the end of my teen years I read

“Exodus” by Leon Uris, which, among other things, describes the formation of the first Kibbutz. The idea of living in community without private property, sharing everything, inspired my youthful imagination. At the next available holiday I travelled from London to Northern Israel and gave 6 weeks of volunteer work to a Kibbutz. It was fun, but idealistically disappointing. By the time I visited, some members of the kibbutz had their own private bank accounts. The degree of integration lived among early Christians was not simply a product of need or social engineering. It was evidence of Almighty God transforming corrupt human hearts. The apostle John sets this quality of relationship as evidence of being a true disciple of Jesus Christ (John 13:35) and even as a test of new birth (1 John 3:14).

One day, a brother named Joseph, a very positive brother, “sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet” (4:36,37). Ananias noticed that this generous act created a lot of good feeling within the Christian community. Many thankful, happy and admiring comments were circulated. Such was the impact of Joseph's way of living, that the apostles changed his name to Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement). Perhaps Ananias did not relate too well to Peter, a rough ex-fisherman. But property-owner Barnabas was more his type. In Barnabas, Ananias had now found a good model of spirituality to follow. There is a danger of following good positive behavioural externals without the necessary internal reality.

We humans are strange: we have the capacity to give all we possess to the poor and surrender our body to the flames, yet for the wrong reasons (1 Cor. 13:3). This sacrificial giving without a genuine heart leads to disappointment and eventually to bitterness. People aren't so thankful. Those who give and serve expecting human praise and gratitude sooner or later will feel hurt and discouraged. It may even lead to anger and depression. Ananias desired the popularity of Barnabas. He coveted the kind words and admiration of God's people. But deep inside his heart, there was serious unfinished work. To follow men of God, we need the transformed heart of these men of God. Are you giving and working hard, expecting the “well done” from fellow saints? Are you concerned about your “standing” in your Christian community? In some communities you need to speak in tongues or fall down to be considered spiritual. In others you need a tie and jacket or a certain vocabulary in prayer in order to be considered spiritual. To strive for human approval will eventually force us to pretend, to lie, to be what we are not.

One of the many blessings of married life is to have at our side a second conscience, a conscience we cannot manipulate with endless mental arguments. Was it Sapphira's or Ananias' idea to deceive the apostles? Acts 5:2 hints that perhaps Ananias was the one who initially proposed the deceitful plan. The ending would be so different if Sapphire would have said: “Darling Ananias, I know you are a very generous man. Let's sell the plot of land and give half to the apostles and invest the other half in stocks and shares towards our pension plan. And let's be open about it!” This last sentence would have made the difference between life and death. Dear sisters, you have a key role to play in your husbands conscience. Speak up in love. Don't allow your husband to drift towards religious hypocrisy. You know him better than anybody else on earth and the Lord holds you responsible for your agreed actions.

It has been said that the image others have of our Godliness usually exceeds our reality. The divergence between what we are and what we should be (and would like to be) is at times depressing. The name **Ananias** means “God is gracious”. The Lord knows our shortcomings. He is very aware of the gap between our biblical knowledge and our lifestyle, between our talking and our doing. But praise be to God, He is and will always be gracious. If the Lord would kill inconsistent Christians today, who would stand? Fellow traveller, let’s leave aside our preoccupation with appearances and our image, and work on reality. Honesty and transparency are two important elements in our journey of spirituality.

Ananias - the Obedient Risk-Taker

In Acts chapter 9 we find our second Ananias. He was a converted Jew who lived outside Israel in the large city of Damascus. The apostle Paul later described him as “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there” (Acts 22:12). Perhaps this referred to his life before conversion, but this is not clear. If he was still an observer of the law, we could conclude that Ananias was a relatively new convert from Judaism to Christianity. But his conversion was real. Scriptures refer to him as a “disciple named Ananias” (9:10) and he was being persecuted for his new-found faith in Christ. The depth of character of this Ananias far exceeds the previous one. It is evident that the **Lordship of Christ** had grabbed this man's soul. In becoming a Christian, he knew he was no longer a free agent to do as he pleased. He was now a servant of Jesus Christ. Although Ananias expressed some doubts as to his personal security, he always referred to Jesus as “Lord” (9:10,13,17). It is OK to express our fears and doubts to the Lord. Not in a spirit of disagreement or confrontation, but seeking clarification. The virgin Mary also did this (Luke 1:34). Some prefer intelligent obedience, some blind obedience. But the key is obedience. It is not a matter of using the word “Lord” when we pray or talk, it is a matter of submitting happily to His rights on our life. A willingness to risk misunderstanding, criticism and even risk physical integrity.

There is a detail in this story which is very telling. Saul was in Damascus, hurting (he had fallen to the ground), blind, and in his confusion he was praying (9:11). The Lord then gave Saul a vision. In the vision he saw “a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight” (9:12). Then the Lord gave a second “audio-visual” message, where he informed Ananias about the vision given to Saul. What is amazing is that Saul’s vision comes before Ananias’ vision. The Lord had such confidence in the obedience of Ananias that He could include his name in Saul’s vision before even talking to him. Ananias’ understanding of Lordship had developed into **habitual obedience**. The Lord could now count on His servant. Could the Lord include you and me by name in a vision to someone else? Can the Lord rely on us to listen and obey? Or does our obedience depend on what others do, what programme is on the TV that night, whether I like the proposal, whether it has been done before, or if agree with the Lord? The Lord expected Ananias to risk his health (Saul could have turned nasty) and to risk his reputation (remember he was highly respected and that could change). He was asked to do something risky and uncomfortable.

A similar pattern of visions appears in the following chapter (10). The first vision to Cornelius in which Peter’s name is mentioned, and then Peter’s own vision. Although the Lord’s instructions went against Peter’s natural instincts, against his religious

feelings, against his traditions, Peter risked his reputation and obeyed. The Lord knew He could also count on Peter. Obedience, like faith, grows stronger with use. "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much" (Luke 16:10).

It is worth pointing out that Ananias was exposed to risk in the path of obedience. There is nothing spiritual about risk. In fact, different personalities feel differently about taking on risk. The virtue is not risk, it is obedience. But usually obedience requires faith, and faith involves a degree of risk. When does the Lord guide His servants? The Lord had a few words for Saul on the road to Damascus but fuller guidance followed later. Saul's attitude of prayer probably placed him in the condition to receive a vision from the Lord. In the next chapter the Lord gives Peter a vision. Where was Peter? "Peter went up on the roof to pray" (10:9). If we also want guidance from the Lord, we also need this quietness in prayer. How can the Lord lay on our heart the need to visit a sick saint in hospital or disciple a new believer? We need quietness in His presence. Do we desire to be used of the Lord in a children's Bible club or helping in the assembly? We need that quietness in His presence. At times we feel confused. We may desire guidance for an important decision. The Lord longs to guide, but we need that stillness in His presence.

After Ananias delivered his message to Saul, he returns to obscurity. Like John the Baptist, he obediently did his bit, and then disappeared. The needs are great and we can't do everything, yet each of us is called by God to do something. May we join the army of faithful saints who have gone before us and obediently do our little bit before we also "disappear".

Ananias - the Religious Ladder-Climber

Our last Ananias is also a Jew, also a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews. Through years of devoted work he climbed the Jewish religious ladder, and eventually became their high priest (23:2). The office of high priest was created by God Himself, and in those days when the nation of Israel was central to God's dealings with man, it was a very privileged job with awesome responsibility. Times were changing and God's dealings with man were also changing. Not aware of these changes, Ananias held on tightly to the reins of power. Not political power, since the Romans had got that. Not spiritual power either, since the emerging Church of Christ had that. Ananias defended the only power he could still control: organised religion and economic influence. When the Lord removes His lampstand (His presence) from a local church, local leadership is left in the same position as Ananias.

After being an exemplary Pharisee, Paul had now become a great irritation to Ananias and other Jewish religious leaders. Initially it was Jesus who challenged their authority. Now Jesus' followers were not submitting to their leadership. Paul's selfless abandonment in the pursuit of the expansion of the Church of Christ, was interpreted by them as: "We have found this man to be a trouble maker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ring leader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple" (24:5,6). This highlights a latent danger in all forms of organised religion: spiritual growth is equated with progressing within religious structures. Christians with this approach to spirituality strive to be "on the board of directors". Then they must show that they are worthy. Next they must defend their

post. Perhaps that is why the Lord has designed His Church in such a way that the maximum authority on earth is given to the leaders of the local church. There is no one but Christ above them. There is simply no big ladder to climb!

A while back I read that, given past experience, it is very unlikely that a believer will be able to live 50 years in “Christian circles” and not live some form of schism. Division among God’s people is always painful, but perhaps more complex among those who love religious ladders and authority structures. Is it possible to have “sincere love for your brothers” and “love one another deeply, from the heart” during periods of conflict? Some would say yes, as long as those who disagree with me are willing to obey the truth the way I do (1 Peter 1:22). We are prone to think that if a brother is honest before God, he must see the solution or the truth as I see it. We are inclined to explain all our differences in terms of carnal or legal, spiritual or non-spiritual, loose or committed, obedient or disobedient. In Acts 23 Paul is made to stand before the Sanhedrin. The apostle opens his defence as follows: “My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day” (23:1). At this point, “Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth” - where it hurts (23:2). What had Paul said? What irritated Ananias so much? Why such aggression? It had become impossible for Ananias to contemplate the possibility that his adversary was acting with a clear conscience before God.

Perhaps if we allow in our mind the possibility that a brother or sister can understand a portion of Scripture differently from me **and do so with a clear conscience before God**, it would reduce our urge to “strike him on the mouth”. It may help us practice sincerely love in the midst of conflict. Truth is obviously more important than conscience. Paul, for example, had a clear conscience while killing Christians. In doing so, Paul was wrong, but not a hypocrite, not perverse.

Ananias and his friends were determined to get rid of Paul. They felt this to be their duty given their position on the religious ladder. They assumed (21:29). They took solemn oaths, they planned, they used pretexts, they were devious (23:12-15). When the Romans transferred Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea, Ananias still felt bound to duty. His approach to spirituality required this thorough pursuit. He took some elders and his lawyer (Tertullus) and they “brought their charges against Paul before the governor” (24:1). Human powered religion relies on group pressure and religious lawyers. God’s truth, reality as it is, stands firm and calm. But, if you were in Paul’s shoes, or should I say, in Paul’s chains, how would you feel towards Ananias? Ananias succeeded in that the apostle died without ever recovering his freedom. Was that fair? Was Paul working on a strategy to strike back? Did he seek revenge?

For Paul to remain useful under these difficult conditions, he did not allow bitterness, anger or resentment to get a grip on his heart. We are told that “man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:20). At least three disciplines protected Paul’s heart: he lived conscious that the LORD was with him (23:11), he behaved in such a way “to keep a clear conscience before God and man” (24:16) and he never forgot WHO had called him and FOR WHAT. He was restricted but not silent. He was surrounded but not fearful. He was in chains, but still an ambassador (Ephesians 6:19,20). Is bitterness, anger or resentment taking root in your heart? There is no justification. This dangerous and defiling acid emerges as we

seek to defend ourselves. It must be recognised and confessed as sin. Then we can follow the apostle's 3 disciplines to protect our hearts and keep us useful.

The Lord then used these frustrating and restrictive conditions to refocus Paul's ministry. Because of his prison, the Lord made it possible for him to witness to the governor Felix (24:2,10), to Porcius Festus (24:27), to King Agrippa and Bernice, to "high ranking officers and leading men of the city" (25:23) and to many in Rome (28:30,31). He also had more time available to write apostolic letters. Have you recently lost a loved one? Is your freedom being limited by age or bad health? Are you going through some form of financial crisis? Could it be that the Lord is using change, pain or conflict to redirect your area of service? Thank the Lord for His past faithfulness. Don't stare at the limitations. Look up and move calmly through the new doors the Lord opens. The Lord's prophetic words to the previous Ananias begun to be fulfilled: "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before Gentiles and their kings" (9:15).

Conclusion

The apostle Paul desired that new believers would grow and become "spiritual" (1 Cor. 3:1). The local church needs "spiritual" people (Gal. 6:1). **Which Ananias** best reflects your approach to spirituality? Being spiritual is not a level or a state we reach, but rather a way of life, a road we walk with Jesus. Early Christians were those who "belonged to the Way" (Acts 9:2). They worshipped God as followers of the Way (24:14). The term "the Way" suggests boundaries, motion and destination. We are not called to jump and smile for those standing on the sides, neither seek the approval of those walking with us on the Way - **like the first Ananias**. There are no such things as ladders, structures and privileged positions on this road to spirituality. We shall progress no faster by condemning other ways or by criticising other Christian's walking styles (although we need not follow them nor imitate them). We need not be aggressive - **like the last Ananias**. The Way is the same, but the scene is constantly changing. Today it is sunny, tomorrow it may be windy. Sometimes the road is up hill, and sometimes it leads besides quiet waters. Fellow traveller, the only way to grow in spirituality is to walk daily close to Jesus Christ our leader, enjoy His company, learn to listen to His voice and obey His instructions - **like the second Ananias**. In closing, please take some moments to chew and digest again those well known words of our Lord Jesus: "I am **the way** and **the truth** and **the life**" (John 14:6).

Philip Nunn
Armenia, Colombia
March 2004

Source: www.philipnunn.com