

THE WAY, SESSION 4

We Must Obey God Rather Than Men

The Acts of the Apostles 5:1-6:7, Ananias and Sapphira, Gamaliel, and the Laying On of Hands

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants wrestle honestly with the hardest scene in early Acts, the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, and discover what it reveals: the Church is holy ground, lying to her leaders is lying to the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is God. They then watch the Church survive both persecution from outside and grumbling from inside, and discover in Acts 6 the pattern by which the Church has handed on ministry ever since: prayer and the laying on of hands.

Catholic Touchstone. Holy Orders and the roots of the diaconate. Faced with her first recorded internal dispute, the Church does not merely write a policy; the apostles establish the Seven with prayer and the laying on of hands, the gesture Scripture uses for conferring office, and the Church's tradition has long seen here the antecedent of the diaconate (Luke never uses the word deacon in the passage; that reading belongs to the Tradition). The apostles set spiritual criteria ("full of the Spirit and of wisdom," 6:3), and confer it by prayer and the laying on of hands (6:6), the same gesture by which Moses commissioned Joshua (Numbers 27:18-23; Deuteronomy 34:9). With the Fathers, the Church has long read Acts 6 as the scriptural seed and paradigm of the diaconate, though Luke never gives the Seven the title deacon. For the Church's doctrine of the diaconate itself, deacons upon whom hands are imposed for a ministry of service, see CCC 1569-1571. A secondary touchstone hides in 5:3-4: "you have not lied to men but to God." Lying to the Holy Spirit is lying to God; the Fathers heard in Peter's sentence a plain testimony to the divinity of the Spirit.

What You Need to Know

Handle Ananias and Sapphira with care; someone in your group will find this story disturbing, and they should not be shamed for it. Get the facts straight first: their sin was not keeping money. Peter says explicitly that the property was theirs and, after the sale, the money remained at their disposal (5:4). The sin was the lie: performing total generosity while secretly withholding, purchasing a reputation for holiness with counterfeit coin, and doing it, as Peter says, not to men but to God.

The scene has a deliberate Old Testament shadow: Achan (Joshua 7), who secretly kept what was devoted to God at the very threshold of the conquest and brought death into the camp. Israel's new beginnings are consistently guarded with severity: Nadab and Abihu at the birth of the priesthood (Leviticus 10), Achan at the entry to the land, Ananias at the birth of the Church. The pastoral Dig Deeper box addresses the why; prepare it well, because the question will come.

The second arrest (5:17-42) escalates everything: an angel opens the prison, the apostles return to the temple at daybreak, and Peter delivers the line that names this session: "We must obey God rather than men" (5:29). Note carefully what this principle is and is not. It is spoken by men who submit to lawful authority everywhere else, who do not flee, riot, or curse the court, and who leave the council rejoicing to be counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name (5:41). Christian civil disobedience is narrow, reverent, and joyful, and it applies when authority commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands (CCC 2242).

Gamaliel's intervention (5:34-39) is a gift of history: one of the most respected rabbis of his generation counsels patience, naming failed messianic movements that scattered when their leaders died, and concludes that if this movement is of God, "you will not be able to overthrow them." Luke lets a Pharisee state the book's thesis. And keep in your pocket a detail for the Dig Deeper: Gamaliel had a student named Saul (Acts 22:3).

Acts 6:1-7 gives the Church's first internal conflict, an ethnic and practical one: the Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. Watch the apostles' response closely with your group. They neither ignore the complaint nor abandon their own calling to fix it personally. They create a new ministry, delegate real authority, and confer it by prayer and the laying on of hands, the gesture the Church reads as the

sacramental conferral of office (CCC 1569). All seven chosen men bear Greek names, which strongly suggests that the apostles drew the Seven from the very community that had been overlooked (names alone are not proof; Andrew and Philip among the Twelve bore Greek names too), so that the aggrieved are the ones set apart to serve, and one of them, Nicolaus, is a proselyte of Antioch, a small geographic seed worth noticing silently. The result: "the word of God increased," and even many priests became obedient to the faith (6:7).

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Joshua 7:1-26. Achan takes devoted things and hides them in his tent at the very start of the conquest; the sin of one man secretly poisons the camp of all. In this pattern of concealed sin at a holy beginning, Ananias stands in the place of the new Israel: a hidden theft of what was performed as devoted, at the community's fragile beginning. Let the group discover this parallel themselves in question 3.

Leviticus 10:1-3. Nadab and Abihu offer unholy fire at the very inauguration of the priesthood and die before the Lord, and Moses' verdict stands over both stories: "I will show myself holy among those who are near me." Thresholds of God's new beginnings are guarded, because what is being founded must not be founded on falsehood.

Numbers 27:18-23 and Deuteronomy 34:9. Moses, at God's command, takes Joshua, a man "in whom is the spirit," lays his hands on him before the congregation, and commissions him, and Deuteronomy concludes that Joshua was "full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands upon him." Hold the exact words: *full of the spirit of wisdom, laid his hands*. Acts 6:3 and 6:6 repeat them almost verbatim. Ordination by the laying on of hands is not a Church invention; it is Israel's own grammar for the transfer of office and grace, and the group will find it live in question 8.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Trallians, 3 (written around AD 107)

Barely two generations after Acts 6, St. Ignatius, bishop of the very Antioch named in this chapter, writes that the Church is recognized by her threefold ministry: let all revere the deacons as Jesus Christ, the bishop as a type of the Father, and the presbyters as the council of God, for without these, he says, there is no Church. What Acts 6 plants, Ignatius already treats as the settled structure of the churches he writes to across Syria and Asia Minor on his road to martyrdom.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit (4th century)

Defending the divinity of the Holy Spirit, St. Basil reasons from Peter's own words to Ananias: to lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie not to men but to God. The Spirit, Basil argues, is therefore not a creature or a force but is Himself God, to be worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son, exactly as the Church confesses in the Creed.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles, Homily 14 (4th century)

On the choosing of the Seven, Chrysostom marvels at the wisdom of the arrangement: the apostles do not dictate names but set the criteria and invite the community to present men full of the Spirit, and then make the appointment their own through prayer and the laying on of hands. Authority and communion cooperate, the complaint of the overlooked is honored, and the ministry of the word loses nothing while the ministry of tables gains everything.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1569-1571. At a lower level of the hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed for a ministry of service; strengthened by sacramental grace, they serve the People of God in the liturgy, the word, and charity. The Latin Church restored the permanent diaconate after the Second Vatican Council.

CCC 1554. The divinely instituted ecclesiastical ministry is exercised in three degrees: bishops, presbyters, and deacons, an ordering already called by these names in the earliest centuries.

CCC 685. To believe in the Holy Spirit is to profess that the Spirit is one of the persons of the Holy Trinity, consubstantial with the Father and the Son, adored and glorified with them.

CCC 827 and 2242. All members of the Church, including her ministers, must acknowledge themselves sinners; the Church is holy while clasping sinners to her bosom. And the citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow directives of civil authority contrary to the moral order: "we must obey God rather than men." The Catechism quotes Acts 5:29 directly.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name. The apostles leave the council "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name" (5:41). The movement itself is still nameless, but its members now suffer for the Name they carry. The irony sharpens; do not resolve it.

Thread 2, The Map. Still Jerusalem, but two hairline cracks appear tonight: Greek-speaking Jews inside the community (6:1), and Nicolaus, "a proselyte of Antioch" (6:5). File the word Antioch away silently. It will matter more than anyone at the table suspects.

Thread 3, Peter First. Peter confronts Ananias, answers the council for the apostles, and the sick are laid out so that even his shadow might fall on them, and all are healed (5:15-16). The tally grows; keep it wordless.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. Quiet again this session, though note that the crisis of chapter 6 erupts precisely around the community's daily table. The Church's tables are never trivial.

Session Goals

1. Participants can state precisely what the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was and was not, and articulate what the episode teaches about the holiness of the Church and the divinity of the Holy Spirit.
2. Participants discover the Achan parallel and can explain why God guards the solemn beginnings of His works with severity.
3. Participants can explain what "we must obey God rather than men" does and does not authorize, and describe the apostles' demeanor under unjust authority.
4. Participants discover the Moses and Joshua background of the laying on of hands and can walk through Acts 6 as the pattern of ordination, answering the strongest congregationalist reading of the chapter.
5. Participants each commit to one act of hidden generosity and one examination of honesty before God this week.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on Gamaliel's student, (3) compress question 6 (the escape and return) into a summary sentence. Do not cut the pastoral Dig Deeper on why God acted severely, and do not cut the steelman chain on Acts 6; they carry the session's honesty and its touchstone.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life, you search hearts and you cannot be deceived. Make us honest tonight: honest about our sins, honest in our generosity, honest in our worship. Give your Church shepherds and servants full of the Spirit and of wisdom, and give each of us the courage to obey God rather than men, with joy and without bitterness. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Where in ordinary life do people polish their image most, resumes, social media, small talk after Mass? Why is the gap between image and reality so tempting to all of us?
2. Have you ever watched an organization handle its first real internal conflict? What separated the ones that grew stronger from the ones that fractured?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 4:32-37, the verses just before tonight's chapter, and meet Barnabas. What is the community's practice with possessions, and what does Barnabas do?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The believers are of one heart and soul, no one claims private ownership over against the needy, and those who own land or houses sell them freely and lay the proceeds at the apostles' feet, where distribution is made as any have need. Barnabas, "son of encouragement," sells a field and brings the money openly and honestly. Luke sets him up deliberately as the true coin against which the counterfeit of chapter 5 will be measured. Note also where the money is laid: at the apostles' feet. The community's charity flows through the apostolic office.

2. Now read Acts 5:1-11 carefully. Before reacting, be lawyers about the facts. According to Peter's own words in verse 4, what exactly was Ananias free to do? So what precisely was the sin?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Peter is explicit: while the property remained unsold it was Ananias's own, and after the sale the money was still at his disposal. No rule required him to give anything. The sin was the lie: keeping back part of the proceeds while presenting the gift as the whole, buying the reputation of a Barnabas at a discount. And Peter names the true offended party twice: "you have not lied to men but to God"; they "agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord." The sin is sacrilege, a performed holiness offered as counterfeit on holy ground.

3. Live discovery. This scene has an Old Testament twin: a hidden theft of what was devoted to God, at the fragile beginning of a new era, judged with death. Turn to Joshua 7 and skim verses 1, 10-13, and 19-26. What parallels do you find, and what do both stories say about beginnings?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Achan, at the very start of the conquest, secretly keeps devoted things and hides them in his tent, and the hidden sin of one man defeats the whole camp at Ai until it is exposed. Ananias stands where Achan stood, a concealed sin at a holy beginning; the analogy is about hiddenness at the threshold, not vowed property, for Peter is explicit that the money remained at Ananias's own disposal: same concealment before God, same

fragile threshold moment, same exposure, same severity. Add Nadab and Abihu at the birth of the priesthood (Leviticus 10:1-3) and a pattern emerges: God guards the decisive beginnings of His works, the inauguration of the priesthood, the entry into the land, the birth of the Church, because what is being founded must not be founded on a lie. The severity is not God losing His temper; it is God teaching, once, unforgettably, at the foundation, that His Church is holy ground and His Spirit cannot be play-acted before.

4. Look again at Peter's two sentences in 5:3-4: lying "to the Holy Spirit" is lying "not to men but to God." The Fathers treasured this verse. What does Peter's grammar quietly confess about who the Holy Spirit is?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

That the Holy Spirit is God. Peter equates lying to the Spirit with lying to God as a simple identity, not an analogy. St. Basil the Great built part of his defense of the Spirit's divinity on exactly this verse. The Spirit who filled the Church at Pentecost is not an energy or an influence but the third divine Person, consubstantial with the Father and the Son (CCC 685), which is precisely why deceiving Him is not a management problem but sacrilege.

5. Read Acts 5:12-16. Describe what life around the apostles looks like now, down to the strangest detail Luke includes.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Signs and wonders multiply, the community meets in Solomon's Portico, none of the outsiders dare join them casually yet the people hold them in honor, multitudes of both men and women are added, and the sick are laid in the streets so that at least Peter's *shadow* might fall on them as he passes. Luke reports the people's instinct, that even Peter's shadow might reach them, and then reports the result, that they were all healed (5:16). Later he says it plainly of the handkerchiefs that had touched Paul (19:12). Grace is scandalously comfortable working through matter and through men, which is the sacramental principle in its boldest form, and a quiet preview of why Catholics have never been embarrassed by relics.

6. Read Acts 5:17-32. The apostles are jailed, freed by an angel, and found at daybreak doing the one thing they were forbidden to do, in the most public place possible. When the council demands an answer, what is Peter's principle in verse 29, and what, judging by the apostles' whole behavior, does that principle not mean?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"We must obey God rather than men." And notice its narrowness: the apostles do not riot, flee the city, curse the court, or reject the council's legitimacy in general. They disobey the one command that directly contradicts Christ's command to preach, they show up openly to accept the consequences, and they answer with respect and with the Gospel. This is the Church's charter for conscience: lawful authority binds, except where it commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands (CCC 2242). It is a scalpel, not a sledgehammer, and it is wielded with reverence and joy rather than rage.

7. Read Acts 5:33-42. Who is Gamaliel, what is his counsel, and how do the apostles leave the council after being beaten?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Gamaliel is among the most honored rabbis of his generation, and his counsel is patience: other movements, Theudas and Judas the Galilean, collapsed when their founders died; if this undertaking is of men it will fail, "but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them." Luke lets a Pharisee state the thesis of the whole book, and twenty centuries later Gamaliel's test has returned its verdict. The apostles, beaten and dismissed, leave *rejoicing* that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name, and they do not stop teaching for a single day. Joy under persecution is the Church's oldest apologetic.

8. Read Acts 6:1-6. The Church faces her first internal crisis: Greek-speaking widows overlooked in the daily distribution. Walk through the apostles' solution step by step. Then, live discovery: turn to Numbers 27:18-23 and Deuteronomy 34:9, the commissioning of Joshua. What exact phrases do the two scenes share?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The apostles take the complaint seriously, refuse to abandon prayer and the ministry of the word, and create a new office: the community presents seven men of good repute, "full of the Spirit and of wisdom," and the apostles pray and lay their hands on them. Now the discovery: Joshua is a man "in whom is the spirit"; Moses lays his hands on him before the congregation and gives him a commission; and Deuteronomy concludes that Joshua was "full of the spirit of wisdom, *for Moses had laid his hands upon him.*" Full of the spirit and wisdom; the laying on of hands; office conferred before the assembly. Acts 6 is speaking Israel's ancient grammar of ordination. The gesture is not decorative; in Scripture it transfers office and confers grace, which is exactly what the Church means by the sacrament of Holy Orders (CCC 1554, 1569).

Build the steelman. A serious Protestant reading of Acts 6, common in congregationalist traditions, runs like this: the congregation, not the apostles, chooses the seven; the men are appointed to wait on tables, a practical task, not a sacred office; the word deacon (*diakonos*) never even appears in the chapter; and the laying on of hands is simply a public blessing, as it is when the church at Antioch sends off Paul and Barnabas (13:3). On this reading, Acts 6 shows bottom-up church governance solving a logistics problem, not the birth of an ordained clergy. State it fairly and let it stand before pressing.

9. Press question one. Look at who does what in 6:3 and 6:6. Who defines the office, sets the criteria, and confers the appointment, and who proposes the men? Then look at what Stephen and Philip immediately do in chapters 6 through 8. Does "waiting on tables" describe their ministry?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The community proposes; the apostles dispose. The apostles create the office, set spiritual rather than merely practical criteria, and confer the appointment themselves by prayer and the laying on of hands. Communion and hierarchy cooperate, but the conferral is apostolic. And the Seven immediately overflow the job description: Stephen works great wonders and preaches the longest sermon in Acts; Philip evangelizes Samaria and baptizes the Ethiopian official. Men appointed to distribute food received, with the laying on of hands, grace for far more, which is what the Church means when she calls the diaconate a sacramental office and not a task force (CCC 1570). An honest hedge for your group: Luke never uses the noun *diakonos* here, and the Church does not hang the doctrine on one chapter alone; she reads Acts 6 together with the unbroken witness of the Fathers, and within about seventy years St. Ignatius of Antioch describes deacons, presbyters, and bishops as the recognized structure of the churches everywhere he writes.

10. Read Acts 6:7, one verse, slowly. What three things does Luke report, and which of the three is most startling?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The word of God increased, the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and "a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." The last is the shock: temple priests, men whose livelihood and identity were bound to the old sacrifices, submitting to the Gospel in large numbers. The Church that guards her holiness (chapter 5) and orders her ministry (chapter 6) does not shrink; she becomes credible to the hardest audience in the city. Integrity and structure are not obstacles to growth. In Acts, they are its engine.

DIG DEEPER: WHY DID GOD ACT SO SEVERELY?

Say it plainly for your group: this story is supposed to be disturbing, and Luke reports that "great fear came upon the whole church" (5:11), the first time Luke uses the word *church* (*ekklēsia*) in Acts, as if the community only fully knows what it is when it learns what it must not do. God's severity here is rare, foundational, and pedagogical, like Nadab and Abihu and like Achan: at the threshold of a new covenant, God teaches once and unforgettably that His presence is real and cannot be gamed.

Two honest balances. First, Scripture does not tell us Ananias and Sapphira were damned; God's judgment on their bodies is recorded, His verdict on their souls is not, and the Church has never presumed it. Second, the ordinary economy for lies against God is not sudden death but the confessional, which exists precisely so that what killed Ananias, hidden sin performed as holiness, can be spoken aloud and forgiven. The severity of Acts 5 is the exception that teaches; the mercy of absolution is the rule that heals.

DIG DEEPER: GAMALIEL HAD A STUDENT

The rabbi who counseled the council to wait and see had a brilliant pupil from Tarsus. Saul was "brought up at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3), and in two chapters he will be guarding the coats at a stoning. The teacher advised patience with the Church; the student tried to destroy it, and then became its greatest missionary. Keep the name in your pocket and say nothing yet.

Send (15 minutes)

1. Ananias fell through the gap between his image and his reality. Where is that gap widest in your own life right now, and what would it cost to close it?
2. The apostles rejoiced to suffer dishonor for the Name. What is the closest you have come to paying a social price for your faith, and did you experience anything like their joy? What would have to change in your prayer for that joy to become possible?

Live It This Week

Two assignments aimed at the two halves of tonight. First, hidden generosity: do one genuinely generous thing this week that no one will ever know about, no mention, no post, no hint, the exact inversion of Ananias, giving that is entirely real and entirely unseen (Matthew 6:3-4). Second, honesty before God: make one careful examination of conscience this week focused on a single question, where am I performing a holiness I am not living? And if something surfaces that has been hidden a long time, take it to Confession, where what destroyed Ananias is spoken aloud and destroyed instead.

Closing Prayer

Father of truth, nothing in us is hidden from you, and still you invite us near. Strip us of every performance, teach us the generosity that seeks no witness, and make your Church holy from her foundations. Give us servants full of the Spirit and of wisdom, give us the joy of the apostles under trial, and when obedience to you costs us the approval of men, let us pay gladly. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 4, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 4:32-37 (Barnabas, the true coin)
2. Acts 5:1-11 (Ananias and Sapphira)
3. Acts 5:12-16 (signs; Peter's shadow)
4. Acts 5:17-32 (arrest, escape, obey God rather than men)
5. Acts 5:33-42 (Gamaliel; rejoicing under dishonor)
6. Acts 6:1-7 (the Seven; the laying on of hands; the priests believe)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

7. Joshua 7:1, 10-13, 19-26 (Achan)
8. Leviticus 10:1-3 (Nadab and Abihu)
9. Numbers 27:18-23 (Moses commissions Joshua)
10. Deuteronomy 34:9 (full of the spirit of wisdom; hands laid)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

11. Acts 22:3 (Saul at the feet of Gamaliel, Dig Deeper)
12. Acts 19:12 (handkerchiefs from Paul)
13. Acts 13:3 (hands laid at Antioch, steelman)
14. Matthew 6:3-4 (giving in secret)
15. Acts 6:8-8:40 preview (Stephen and Philip exceed the tables)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

16. CCC 1554; CCC 1569-1571; CCC 685; CCC 827; CCC 2242