

**RE-READING ACTS 5:1-11 IN RELATION TO
OFFERING IN THE METHODIST CHURCH OF
SAMOA:
A SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC APPROACH**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a reading and an interpretation of the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 in a first-century Palestine context, using social scientific methods, thus cautiously examines and explores some reasonable causes of the problems occurring in the story through various approaches of social scientific methods. Moreover, a number of considerable social scientific methods will be used as tools for interpretation to re-visit the Methodist Church of Samoa's offering, seen as an oppressive activity to many, though not all, in terms of financial conditions. It will also attempt to find possible answers, if there are any, to unravel a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the 'giving all' phrase 'to the church' in the story of Ananias and Sapphira as used by most, not necessarily ministers. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to reconsider the interpretation of the story of Ananias and Sapphira, with the outcomes from social scientific tools, in a way that offers space for people to make their offering without fear or feelings of coercion with offering to God should be a voluntary giving from the heart rather than a demanding practice within the church.

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this thesis, which is 27,972 words in length (excluding the bibliography and front matter), has been written by me, that it is the result of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, in any previous written work for an academic award at this or any other academic institution.

I also declare that this thesis has not used any material, heard or read, without academically appropriate acknowledgment of the source.

Signed: 

Date: 9th October 2019

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my great grandfather the late Rev. Kamu Tagaolo Wright, the late aunty Ausaga Tago, the late aunty Unaite Potogi, my mother; the late Ama Tusipa Toma, the late Rev. Faleupolu Taulelei and the late Molilaaufoga'a and aunty Donna Kamu who had nurtured me from my early childhood till God called me to follow his footsteps.

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List of Abbreviations

ASC: Alternate States of Consciousness

ESV: English Standard Version

KJV: King James Version

NAS: New American Standard Bible

NET: New English Translation

NIV: New International Version

NRSV: New Revised Standard Version

Chapter 1

Thesis Overview

1.1. Introduction

This thesis originated from the undertakings of the Theological Hermeneutics Course last year (2018); a pre-requisite requirement for the fulfilment of the Masters in Theology Programme at the Pacific Theological College. This course foreshadowed a continual vision in me to challenge and promote the uniqueness of Pacific cultures as being not only distinctively rich in meaning but also as a way of reinterpreting the existing philosophies and concepts pertaining to task of interpretation. In particular, Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical articulation of horizons has been instrumental in my understanding of how a text can both challenge a reader and also be challenged by a reader.¹ These insights prompted an interest to approach the bible with a particular slant towards the worldview of the reader as a way to unearth new and fresh meanings. Coincidentally, Oceania

¹Gadamer was a German philosopher well-known for his masterwork *Truth and Method*. His focus on interpretation had much to do with bringing together the social context of the text and the social context of the reader. His theory on the fusion of horizons demonstrates this emphasis whereby the horizons of the questioner and the text, allow the former to become an integral part of the interpretive process. This combination of meaning from the worldview of the reader/interpreter along with knowledge of the text based on its linguistic and historical information constitutes what he believes would be a sensible interpretation (Thiselton 1980, 11).

scholars, both in the secular and biblical circles², believe that our ideas and values should be acknowledged and recognized in such a way that they could work alongside other existing ideologies rather than depending on the dominant understanding that there is only one truth.

The re-appropriation of social values and indigenous concepts as interpretive frameworks is not a new device. Indeed, it encourages people from every direction to embrace the richness of their own cultures as a way of contributing a plurality of meanings to the Scriptures as opposed to depending on conventional interpretations. Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" also allowed for the contemporary reader to do this by creating a dialogue with one's own historicity and the historical background of a text. Thiselton in support of James Barr argues that the need for individual readers to engage the Bible is both natural and necessary (Thiselton 1980, 9). While this may be true, one of the dangers behind such an approach is that it could lead to a disregard for proper exegetical work.

²The OBSA which stands for Oceania Biblical Study Association holds a biennial conference in different Oceania location. Its purpose is not only to promote Biblical Studies in the region, but also Oceanic hermeneutics as a way to address some of the ongoing issues in the region. A similar emphasis was echoed in another conference launched in 2018 called the 'Inaugural Pacific Philosophy Conference.' This conference emphasized the importance of reviving indigenous Pacific Philosophies.

Nonetheless, it is still intriguing to see what contemporary readers have done with this newfound freedom to interpret or even misinterpret texts. Furthermore, I am interested in re-evaluating how stories that are perhaps stigmatized by traditional interpretations could be understood in an alternative light. Among these stories, I will focus on the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira as recorded in the book of Acts 5:1-11. Traditionally understood as a death sentence handed down to a couple that lacked generosity, I intend to see how this interpretation has shaped the meaning of this story in both a positive and negative way in relation to giving. This usual reading of the story in a linear sense, offers no other way for the accused party to be resurrected or pardoned. The intention is not to challenge what has been written. Rather, the aim is to point at how the text is both antagonistic and peculiar to the general understanding of modern readers in the role of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts especially with the growth of Christianity in the first century.

Theologically, such texts deal with the concept of sin, the lack of grace, the process of offering and also the idea of discipleship. As much can be said about each topic from a theological standpoint, I will employ an in-depth analysis from a biblical standpoint. By re-engaging the world of the text first, the intention is to interpret the text for what it is or its traditional understanding of the text, before exploring other possibilities of what the text could mean to the reader.

According to Christian belief, the Bible is naturally attributed as the Word of God. The sacredness of the Biblical texts is and will always remain, being embraced by believers through time and space. Traditional stories are heavily regarded and kept by Christian believers. Engaging with the story, the intent is not to overrule previous accusations about the actions of the couple (claiming it was sacrilegious) but to seek and identify the untold story of why they decided to keep part of the proceeds of the land sale. This void, in which the two primary characters are left voiceless, raises some pertinent questions and concerns that warrant further investigation. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien (2012) share an important point as to why worldview is pivotal to this investigation.

Worldview, which includes cultural values and other things we assume are true, can be visualized as an iceberg. The majority of our worldview, like the majority of an iceberg, is below the water line. The part we notice - what we wear, eat, say and consciously believe - is really only the visible tip. The majority of these powerful, shaping influences lurk below the surface, out of plain sight. More significantly, the massive underwater section is the part that sinks ships! Another way to say this is that the most powerful cultural values are those that go without being said. It is very hard to know what goes without being said in another culture. But often we are not

even aware of what goes without being said in our own culture. This is why misunderstanding and misinterpretation happen (Richards and O'Brien 2012, 12).

In relating this comment to the story of Acts 5:1-11, it could also be said that not all interpretations are as they appear. In other words, there are visual aspects that are believed only because one cannot know what is below the surface. Thus, it goes without saying; that meanings of what is seen on the surface makes up only portions of a greater whole. Such interpretations deserve further investigation to allow hidden portions of it to be anticipated so that meanings deriving from world foreign to the contemporary reader is comprehended.

Throughout this chapter, I will first explore the general problems associated with the text of Acts 5:1-11. In relocating this problem within my own context, I will put forth in the second section my position in relation to the problem and why it is central to my wellbeing. Thirdly, I will propose a suitable methodology that could help address the problem raised, followed by the overarching aim of this research.

1.2. Problem

In advancing the work that began in my Theological Hermeneutics course I have appreciated the invitation of the reader into the interpretation process, but with caution. For Richards and O'Brien, "it is commonplace in both academic and popular

conversation” to view interpretation as a process where readers allow their presuppositions to dictate and shape the way they understand biblical texts (Richards and O’Brien 2012, 15). In his dissertation, McCabe (2008) recalls Gail O’Day’s remarks about this particular text calling it, “perhaps the most infamous story in Acts,” and saying that it “offends modern sensibilities and defies any rational psychological explanation” (O’Day 1992, 98 cited in McCabe 2008, 1). This only goes to show that the story, as confronting as it may be for readers, remains fluid for modern readers and invites them with the opportunity to seek what has not yet been said. It is within this context that I intend to clear any misconceptions about the concept of giving.

As theological interpretations might pose a sense of biasness through one’s worldview, it also projects a plethora of possibilities. By beginning with biblical hermeneutics, the intent is to look at the problem from the world behind the text and investigate how those meanings could challenge what is naturally presupposed by the reader. With the different locales³ of biblical interpretation in mind, there are some important questions that should be answered. If the Book of Acts attests to the

³ Different locale refers to the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world of the reader where the variety of hermeneutical approaches are formulated. Reading from a various set of locations offer a wide range of interpretations to be made.

work of the Holy Spirit in saving and reinforcing people to believe in God, where does repentance come in? Why was it (repentance) not offered to the couple? In addition, Ananias seems to be the main subject of the text, yet little is said about why Sapphira was punished; was this the result of her colluding with her husband to keep part of the proceeds?

In regards to such questions, we see how the story becomes very problematic because it provides one with the thought of what is naturally deemed acceptable as an offering to God. Hence, we will connect to stories on offerings by looking first at the offerings of Cain and Abel. Cain offered the harvest of the land whereas Abel offered fresh livestock. In that situation, God favoured the latter's offering over the former's. Similarly, connections can be made to the story of the widow who offered her two coins as recorded both in Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 21:1-4. Her offering was deemed of higher value than those of the rich men within the synagogues. Within both stories of Cain and Abel as well as the widow's offering, links are often made to the idea of giving from one's heart. So, what about Ananias and Sapphira?

From the authors' experience, the usual interpretation of Acts 5:1-11 correlates with the growing problem among members of the Methodist Church of Samoa regarding excessive giving or the idea that nothing is to be spared when it comes to church offerings. In the context of Ananias and Sapphira, their giving was deemed

unacceptable because it was done under false pretences. As a result of the lie, both figures were struck dead. This leads to other important questions. For example, what is considered giving from the heart? Are there limitations posed about giving from the heart? In relation to the story, does giving from the heart equate with giving all? Considering the background of the event for a brief moment, we understand the circumstances of people selling their properties and giving all proceeds to the needy and poor as expressed in Acts 4:32-37. Is the selling of property and the offering of a partial amount as done by Ananias and Sapphira not deemed as giving from the heart? Was the giving laid out by Barnabas and others in Acts 4:32-37 the new standard of offering or determinant of what is considered, giving from the heart?

Such questions are important because they shape the thinking in this thesis. Problematic stories as such are seen to raise many concerns of generosity and giving or offering; such problems are seen to affect the wellbeing of the church, specifically the Methodist Church of Samoa. The concept of giving as expressed in Acts 5:1-11 serves now as a normal standard of how offerings are meant to be done within the Samoan Methodist Churches. In essence then, we look deeper into the problem of the Methodist Church of Samoa to identify how such a story can be addressed in new ways.

1.3. Worldview

Growing up in Samoa as a Methodist Christian, offering to the church is vital to our livelihood. Since the church is sacred, a common belief is that we are obligated as believers to sustain the church through our giving, meaning contributing and providing for the life and welfare of those who serve. It is meant to assist with church functions, activities and programs. Giving is also done to maintain the wellbeing of the church, both in and outside. Such form of giving has long been the custom within the church; perhaps even before the arrival of the missionaries.

Prior to the arrival of the missionaries, it was commonly regarded that the essence of God was felt in Samoa. There was a common sense of respect and reverence in the extended family circle. The hierarchical status was upheld and everyone lived according to that system. Its social content reflected a collectivistic society. Such hierarchal status, although posing oppressive connotations, there always remained a mutual sense of respect and love for one another. Such can be understood through the sacred relationships which existed between the high chief and his family, the high chief to other chiefs of lower status, as well as the covenantal relationship between brother and sister which Malama Meleisea elaborated on,

There were '*sacred*' chiefs; the alii and '*secular*' chiefs; the tulafale. Also the very important *feagaiga* relationship accorded a sister '*sacred*' status and her brother '*secular*' status. After Christianity was accepted, the

feagaiga relationship was extended to the relationship between a pastor, who held a 'sacred' status, and his congregation who had 'secular' status.' (Meleisea 1987, 35)

Such relationships are seen here to extend beyond chiefly relations and into relations with the pastor. Such an extension of relationships shows exactly how Samoans tend to view how things are to be done in society with the Church at its pinnacle. As Samoans are seen to be shaped by the missionaries and their practices in Christian teachings and beliefs, we Samoans cannot disregard our traditional relationships which existed before the missionaries arrived and our relationships still valued today. Therefore, we see how important our traditional relationships are in terms of how they affect the way in which we give. For example, this can be proven in the manner we give our offering to the church, as mentioned by Meleisea,

When the village decided to become Christian they built a church and a house for a teacher or a pastor, and began to contribute to the church by supporting the pastor with food and services, and by contributing coconut oil to the senior representative of the mission in each district. The oil was collected in large barrels by the missionaries and shipped to England for sale, to earn money for the mission. In the early days of the mission, *masoa* (arrowroot starch), was also given as a church contribution, and this too was exported for sale in England (Meleisea 1987, 54).

The hierarchal understanding of Samoan living influences this style of serving and in essence, such sense of giving and supporting those above is seen to influence the sense of support given in building the church, tending to the mission of Christ, and maintaining the needs of the one who had been called to serve within the church.

From a Samoan perspective, giving essentially gives value to people's everyday lives. Such giving is essential because it functions not for a particular group but society as a whole. Sharing and giving are a way of life which we generally have and have become inevitably accustomed to.

In the Samoan context, one's family name or title is an immense treasure. Names are treasured because they not only provide a sense of identity but also a link to one's history and relationship to ancestors who may have also carried such a name. This is because names provide a living link between a person and their lands; the past and the present; and the living and the unborn. A newly appointed chief who is given a title, therefore, takes on multiple responsibilities that must be upheld. When tending to family functions and duties, the chief always takes the head role. When resolving issues, families seek the chief's wisdom during the mediation. Just as the chief is meant to provide for his family, the chief is also meant to provide for the church in any way possible. In essence, the chief in the Samoan context carries a huge responsibility within the family. Such a role can be so burdensome because often one's sense of upholding values is no longer done out of protection and caring for one's family, but rather a way to see who can do their job the best. As we focus on the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira, the process of giving to the church, in many cases, is done out of competition.

Addressing first the concept of competition, we look at the process of giving - *folafola*. In the practice of *folafola*, donations by church members are announced so the congregation hears how much each family donates. It is a precondition in these events to encourage other members of the congregation or its invitees to contribute. Similarly, chiefs and bigger families compete to outdo each other. In that sense the essence of competition can dissuade the genuine spirit of giving in the church.

According to remarks by Alec Thornton, Maria T. Kerslake and Tony Binns (2010), they have recognized a few key factors which assist to the decline of the mainline churches. Referring to the practice of *folafola* as previously mentioned, there is a lot of pressure placed on church members (Thornton, Kerslake and Binns 2010, 7). Pressure is seen primarily through the concept of giving. As a result, families are pressured into two distinct situations; (1) should the family give the normal amount as contribution to the church and suffer as a family having little or nothing to eat for the month or (2) should the family decrease their monthly church offering to help put food on the family table and consequently face the shame that will be brought on them by the people for not giving the whole amount? Referring to the story of Ananias and Sapphira, the concept of giving everything is commonly regarded as the better option.

Looking at the concept of tithes which is linked to the Old Testament, this type of offering is ten percent of one's gross household income to be used as donation. However, recent statistics show how ten percent has significantly increased to nearly thirty to fifty percent per household within the mainline churches of Congregational, Catholic and Methodist churches (Thornton, Kerslake and Binns 2010, 8). Such increase in giving essentially lead to this form of pressure for everyone else to follow suit and such number serves as a new set amount that is to be the norm throughout the church. Despite one not having enough, despite one becoming poorer and not meeting basic needs, still they are expected to follow the new norm due to the pressure of being shamed by the community. Such style of giving which promotes a sense of pride and shame, a sense of pressure and public humiliation are viewed as the primary reason for the decrease of membership within the mainline churches which leads to the growing rate seen within the smaller churches like the Mormons/Latter-Day Saints (LDS), Assemblies of God (AOG) and Seventh-day Adventists (SDA) (Thornton, Kerslake and Binns 2010, 10).

In a nutshell, it is vital to note the struggle faced by the church members in regards to this concept of giving which, in reality, is not meant to pose forms of oppressive behaviour and thoughts. In line with maintaining chiefly relationships, familial relationships as well as covenantal relationships between brother and sister,

giving in essence was something familiar before the arrival of missionaries. In this context, giving here was done to ensure the wellbeing of one another. However, when missionaries arrived and reintroduced the concept of giving as expressed in the Bible, there was confusion on how the word 'giving' had been interpreted and adapted. Giving as expressed in the Bible was done out of the goodness of one's heart (as expressed through the story of Cain and Abel as well as parable of the widow and her two coins) but has now shifted to a sense of giving everything (as expressed in the story of Ananias and Sapphira). Similarly, as seen in the Samoan context, giving was once viewed to show care for one another, but has now transitioned to a sense of competition which hints at signs of pressure, fear, pain and shame.

In an attempt to review the types of giving, I will primarily look at the concept of giving as expressed in the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira as recorded in Acts 5:1-11. In looking at the text, we are presented with various questions. Firstly, what does it mean to 'give' both in the ancient world and in the narrative? This story poses many problems. What is the author seeking to portray in this narrative? In the process of 'giving from the heart', is there a specific limit to what is deemed 'from the heart'? How can we provide a review on the text which can pose new ways of offering that is less oppressive to the Samoan Methodist Churches? How can we

review the process of giving in today's modern context? These questions will be explored and analyzed throughout this thesis.

1.4. Methodology

The first thing that needs to be made clear is that, the author specifically focused on a group of readers and not readers of diverse social context of different times and spaces. It was meant only for specific group(s) (Rohrbaugh 2006, ix). These special groups, on the other hand, upon receiving what has been written will know exactly why, what, where, and who the message was for and what the message was about. In regards to our text, we intend to identify who exactly these groups are and what was truly intended by the narrator. Stories as such in the Bible were written for specific people, it is natural for one to find similar meaning for one's present contexts.

Modern readers, however, must be reminded that such Biblical writings were not intended for them. Rohrbaugh highlights the vast difference in terms of culture, worldview, social patterns, and daily expectations between the ancient Mediterranean worlds and our times. As modern readers attempt to interpret the ancient texts in light of present contexts, there is often an element of misinterpretation. The problem with misinterpretation often occurs when people

tend to get carried away with the notion that the Bible is the word of God. Viewing the Bible as such offers various interpretations. In essence, we tend to lose the focus of what is traditionally being said within the text.

In search then of identifying what is traditional or beneath the iceberg, I will employ a social-scientific criticism approach. In an attempt to go beyond the mainstream interpretations of Ananias and Sapphira, it is important to uncover other social factors from their context that could shed some light on their actions. In reference to Gadamer's different horizons, the development has seen three different worlds: behind the text, of the text, and the world in front of the text (world of the reader). The danger of such readings is the inclinations of the reader to impose on the text through relativizing truths from their own contexts. In doing so, readers dominate the meaning of a text for whatever purpose. This uncritical imposition on the text undoubtedly results in meanings often being lost. In essence then, we intend to focus on the world behind the text first before we engage with what is in front providing a sort of fusion of horizons as Gadamer expressed.

To that end (fusion of horizons), the use of social-scientific criticism in this thesis aims to facilitate a cross-cultural encounter whereby the traditions of both past and present are juxtaposed in an effort to decipher a new meaning (Rohrbaugh 2006,

5).⁴ This dialogue between lifeworlds is important because it allows readers of all ages and various cultures to engage in the reconstruction of meaning.

Assuming that Luke's point of departure is based on his understanding of historical events that took place around him, I intend to begin with the author's experience as a starting point to the social historical investigation. Since New Testament documents were mostly written for specific occasions, to a specific audience and with particular issues of concern in mind, I will use these particularities as a fitting prelude to discuss my conceptual lens of *fā'asoa* in Chapter Four.

1.5. Aim

It is the aim of this paper to provide a renewed perception of Acts 5:1-11. As mentioned earlier, the traditional interpretations of the narrative have caused confusion especially in relation to the concept of offering. In particular, I am interested in knowing whether giving from the heart means to give all one possesses or to give what we can wholeheartedly. Similarly, the Samoan context has shown a shift from giving to others in a manner of caring for one another to a style of giving under pressure to avoid shame and embarrassment. Trying to seek alternative ways

⁴ This will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

in which giving ought to be performed from the example in Acts 5:1-11 is precisely what this thesis intends to uncover.

To achieve this aim, Chapter Two will begin with the world of the Bible before any attempt to bring in my own *itulagi*⁵ to dialogue with the text. The rationale in structuring my thesis in this way is to show what has been normalized in interpretation but also make room for a hopeful alternative.

This notion of valuing the lifeworld (*itulagi*) of the reader is not only encouraging for me as a contemporary reader, but I am equally convinced that such interpretation would not be harmful to the text as many would assume. On the other hand, as with all biblical interpretations, there is always room for the same text to read anew—informed by ideals innate to our contexts/experiences. This corresponds with the Russian formalist understanding of the term “defamiliarization” which loathes the way in which “normal, everyday perceptions of the world become habitual” and worn-out to the point that it numbs our senses to new perspectives and new ways of seeing the everyday and familiar (Resseguie 2005, 33). Going

⁵ Rev. Dr. Upolu Vaai refers to such term as one’s worldview in turn he referred to as ‘lifeworld’ (which this work will also be using hereinafter). The *itulagi* here has to do with one’s horizons as explored by Gadamer but connects directly to the Pacific horizons or worldviews. Within such *lifeworld*, there is a need to rebuild broken relationships and recapturing one’s identity which has been lost due to acts of oppression or in the case of the Pacific, acts of colonization (2017, 7).

against the grain of familiarity which limits change, this view suggests that traditionally understood texts need to be reopened and re-confronted. In that vein, the aim is to put Acts 5:1-11 under the microscope again for modern readers.

1.6. Summary

Throughout this chapter, we explored the problem as seen within the account of Acts 5:1-11, the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira. This story has been traditionally interpreted to relate the sin of the characters as a lie against the Holy Spirit, as well as the failure of the characters to give everything. This traditional view has been exhibited throughout society and has seen to affect the quality of life for the members of the Methodist Church in Samoa.⁶ Giving has long been an integral part of the Samoan way, how they have maintained relationships with one another. Giving, as introduced by the missionaries, has caused some confusion. Some stories hint at the aspect of giving from one's heart (as expressed in the Cain and Abel story as well as the story of the widow and her two-coin offering), contradictions are also seen with Acts 5:1-11 where the process of giving from the heart has been translated to giving all. Such a mind-set has affected the Samoan people and the way offerings

⁶ The most affected ones are the low socio-economic people; particularly the unemployed, the low income earners, sole employment families.