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Inventing Church: Reality Checks

Isaiah 53:4-8; Acts 5-8

One of the first things that the early church did after Jesus left them was go back and re-read the Hebrew Bible, in light of their new understanding of who the Messiah was. To their surprise, they discovered that the Messiah they had come to know had been in scripture all along. One of their first discoveries was the poem of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, describing one who saves others by taking their guilt and burdens on himself. We read Isaiah 53, verses 4-8:

⁴ *Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.*
⁵ *But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.*
⁶ *All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*
⁷ *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*
⁸ *By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.*

We ended our story last week at a time of glory for the fledgling church: Peter and John had been imprisoned for the crime of preaching about Jesus' resurrection, but were released, and the community of Jesus Followers rejoiced. Their joy was contagious; every day new believers joined them in worshiping together, praying, and most of all caring for each other. They began taking in widows and others who had no one to care for them, feeding them every day, which they paid for by pooling their resources and through special gifts. Many gave everything they had into the apostles' safekeeping. There was one man – Joseph from the region we now call Libya – who sold a field and brought all the proceeds to lay at the apostles' feet. This man Joseph was generous in so many ways that the apostles called him “Son of Encouragement,” or Barnabas.

It was a utopia, with everyone sharing everything and making sure everyone was taken care of, but there is a problem with utopian communities made up of people. Have I given it away? Yeah, it's the “people” part. We humans are remarkably gifted at taking anything good and healthy and twisting it some way for our own benefit – for money, power, or admiration.

So there was this couple in that early Jesus group, Ananias and Sapphira. They saw respected how Barnabas had become, at least partly for his generous gift from a sale of property. So they went and sold some land, too. And they also set aside money to give to the apostles. Not all of it, though. And they decided nobody needed to know that they were keeping some of it back. Nobody's business anyway. So Ananias took the portion they had decided to give, laid it at Peter's feet and declared that there was the full amount from the sale.

Now, I don't know how Peter knew that Ananias was lying. Acts doesn't say. Maybe the Spirit revealed it to him. Or maybe the guy who bought the land was Peter's neighbor. However it was, though, Peter knew. "Why are you lying, Ananias? Nobody required you to sell your land. And when you sold it, you didn't have to give all the money to us, or any of it, for that matter. So why lie? Why would you try to lie to God?" Ananias seized his chest, gasped, and fell over dead.

A little later, Sapphira came in, asking for her husband. Peter asked her, "When you sold that land, how much did you get for it?" Sapphira repeated the amount that she and Ananias had agreed on, and Peter shook his head. "So you were in on it. Well, the young men who carried your husband's body out just now will carry yours as well." Immediately Sapphira keeled over dead, and she and her husband were buried together.

As you can imagine, the reputation of this gathering – and especially of Peter – reached mythic proportions in Jerusalem, not just because of people dropping dead but because he continued to heal illnesses and cast out unclean spirits. Soon people were jostling each other just to stand in Peter's shadow when he walked by. This was too much for the priestly leaders, who sent and rounded up all the apostles they could find and shut them in prison. They let them stew there for a night, but when the temple guards went to fetch them to the council the next morning, the prison doors were open, and the apostles were standing in the street outside, preaching to the crowds, bearing witness to the risen Messiah. The guards were a little nervous about these men, not wanting to use force on people who could walk out of prison, but they didn't have to; the apostles agreed to go chat with the council, if they wanted.

It didn't go well for the priests. Again. Again they demanded that Peter and his crowd stop talking about Jesus; again Peter said that they were going to have to obey God rather than the priests. The council began to consider taking more drastic measures, but then one of them spoke up. This was a rabbi named Gamaliel, so respected that he attracted students from all over the world. Gamaliel cleared his throat and said, "You know, we have Messiahs coming out our ears these days. They come, attract a few followers, and then they die, and their followers wander off. But that hasn't happened with this Jesus, has it? I find that striking. We should consider the possibility that this Messiah might just have been from God. If he wasn't, then we don't have to do a thing. The movement will wither up on its own. But if he was . . . do *you* want to be the one found opposing him?" The council let the apostles go.

I mentioned a minute ago that the early gathering had a daily meal for widows and others who had no support. That meal kept getting bigger and bigger – and more complicated. You see, the Jews were a divided people. On the one hand were those who'd been raised in Palestine, and on the other were Jews from Africa or Turkey or elsewhere in the Middle East or Europe. These non-Palestinian Jews were less picky about some of the laws, and they often spoke Greek as their preferred language instead of Hebrew. The two groups didn't really see eye to eye, and some of the widows at the meal were from one group, and some were from the other. So, inevitably, they

clashed. One day a group of Greek-speaking widows took a complaint to the apostles, claiming that the Hebrew-speaking widows were getting bigger portions.

The apostles went into closed session. “Seriously? Bigger portions? It’s free!” “I don’t want to deal with this!” “I know, right? Jesus called us to be witnesses, not nursemaids to a bunch of bickering old ladies!” “If we spend our time sorting out every whinging complaint, when are we going to preach and study and pray?” So they went back to the Greek-speaking widows and said, “It’s not appropriate for us to neglect our calling to serve tables. So we’re going to appoint seven trustworthy men to be in charge of the food distribution.” So they did. They chose seven men – all of them with Greek names, by the way – called them “servants” and put them in charge. The Greek word for “servant” that they used was *diakonos*, or “deacon.”

The names of the seven were: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus. I read the whole list because five of them are never mentioned again, which I assume means that they quietly went about the business of sorting out the territorial complaints of sniping factions in the congregation. Those people are usually not noticed, but they should be. But having done that, let’s talk about Stephen.

Acts describes Stephen as “full of grace and power,” and he went to a synagogue in Jerusalem that was especially for the Greek-speaking Jews and began preaching about Christ – that he was the Messiah and that the Messiah had been different and more than the Jews had ever imagined. He was evidently a persuasive speaker, and he definitely knew his scripture, because no one in the synagogue could refute his arguments. So they accused him of blasphemy and brought him before the council. You remember the council. These Jesus people were getting on their last nerve. The chief priest glared at Stephen. “Blasphemy, eh? How do you plead?”

Every time the chief priest asked a question of the Jesus people, he got a sermon. You’d think he would have learned. Stephen began to preach. It’s a long sermon, taking up the whole of the longest chapter in the Book of Acts, chapter 7, but here’s the gist. Stephen began with Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, telling how God had loved him and set him apart and promised to him that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan. Stephen talked about the covenant of circumcision that had sealed this promise to the Jews, and about Abraham’s son Isaac and grandson Jacob, and his twelve sons, who became the twelve tribes. Then Stephen told how Jacob and his sons left the land and went to Egypt during a famine, where they were protected by Joseph, but where, centuries later, they became slaves. Stephen continued with the story of Moses, telling it in great detail: how he had been preserved as a baby, had fled Egypt as a young man, and had been sent back to Egypt by God to set the people free from their bondage. Stephen described the miracles that God did for the sake of his covenant with Abraham, and how Moses led the people out of slavery and through the desert.

All of this, of course, was familiar and non-controversial to the council and the Jewish crowd listening to Stephen. Then Stephen shifted his narrative. As he told the story of the people in the desert, he stressed how often they had disobeyed Moses, even building idols to bow down to instead of God. Then he said that the Israelites had continued their rebellion by building a temple, which God had explicitly told them not to do, because God can’t be confined to a temple. Now, this is true: God did in fact say that in both 2 Samuel and Isaiah. But it was not a popular position in Jerusalem. Stephen concluded by saying, “You stiff-necked people! Just as your ancestors refused to listen to the Holy Spirit, so do you! Your ancestors killed the prophets who

foretold the Messiah, and you killed the Messiah!” Stephen raised his eyes to the heavens and said, “Look! I see the heavens opening, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

It was a step too far. The crowd covered their ears, shouted “Blasphemy!” and rushed forward, dragging Stephen outside the city, where without benefit of trial, they stoned him to death. Dying, Stephen called out, “Lord, don’t hold this sin against them.” It was the last thing he said. The crowd left him there, and went to pick up their cloaks from a young rabbinical student – actually a student of Gamaliel’s – who had offered to hold them for anyone who wanted to throw stones. The young man’s name was Saul.

The floodgates burst. Having executed one follower of Jesus, the Jewish leaders forgot Gamaliel’s advice and began locking up every other Jesus person they could find. Young Saul began going door to door looking for followers of the Way, as the group was sometimes called, and many of the Jerusalem believers scattered to the countryside for their own safety. One of those who left the city was the deacon Philip, who went north to Samaria. Now you probably remember how the Jews felt about Samaritans – they hated them – but Philip apparently had not gotten that memo, because he started preaching to these despised people about Jesus. And Samaritans began to listen. Philip also performed many signs in their presence – healings and exorcisms, like Peter had done in Jerusalem – and soon he had a group of believers together. There was even one famous magician named Simon there who saw what Philip had done and joined the new group.

When word filtered back to Jerusalem, where the apostles had stayed, keeping a low profile, they didn’t know what to think. Samaritans? Now you might think that they would be more receptive, inasmuch as Jesus himself had preached to Samaritans, but their hesitation isn’t that surprising. When you’ve been told a million times to hate someone, it might take a few repetitions to shake that attitude. Remember that. It’ll come up again. Anyway, the apostles were skeptical enough that they sent Peter and John to check it out. So they came and, to their surprise, found that the Samaritan believers were pretty much like the Jewish believers, and then they laid hands on the Samaritans heads to bless them, and the Samaritans were filled with the Holy Spirit, just as the apostles themselves had been at Pentecost. At that point, there wasn’t much use in arguing. “I guess you’re in,” the apostles said.

Now you remember that I mentioned a certain Simon, who was a famous magician. I have no idea what sort of magician he had been before joining the followers of Jesus. Maybe he’d just been a charlatan and fraud. If you’re one of those who don’t believe in any powers beyond science, then you’ll want to assume that. Me, I’m not as sure of that as I used to be. In any case, he had been impressed by the healings that Philip had done through the power of the Spirit, and he was *really* impressed by what had happened when Peter and John had laid hands on the Samaritan believers. Simon went to Peter and said, “How much would it cost for you to give me that power? I have a lot of gold.”

Peter replied, “Let me tell you where you and your gold can go. How dare you try to buy the gift of God for money? If I were you, I’d go beg God for forgiveness right now.” To this day, the sin of trying to buy spiritual influence with money is called “simony.” Dante has a whole circle of hell reserved for those who commit this sin. I imagine they’ve had to build on a new wing in recent years, just to accommodate the Americans.

Meanwhile, the deacon Philip had moved on. Feeling led by the Lord to go south, he was walking on the road that led from Jerusalem toward Gaza when a chariot approached. A classy chariot, too, carrying an Ethiopian court official, who had been visiting Jerusalem. A voice said to Philip, “Go join that man.” So Philip approached and jogged alongside. He saw that the man was reading a scroll, and looking over the man’s arm, Philip thought he recognized the text. It looked like the book of the prophet Isaiah. “Do you . . . understand . . . what you’re reading?” Philip panted.

“How can I? I have no one to explain it!” the Ethiopian replied. “Do you know this book?” Philip nodded. “Huh. Say, would you like to get up and sit beside me?”

“That’d be . . . that’d be great.”

“Here, look at this bit –” and the Ethiopian read aloud, “*Like a lamb he was led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.* Who’s the prophet talking about, anyway?”

“Well,” said Philip, smiling. “Let me tell you.” And so he did. Before long, they had stopped at a pool of water so that Philip could baptize a new believer. Then the Ethiopian continued on his way, taking good news to Africa, while Philip headed back north, bearing the same good news to every new town he came to.