

My Dear Theophilus: Reality Checks
Acts 5-8

My dear Theophilus,

In my last letter I described the spectacular beginning of what is now called the “Church” – from the miracles that took place at the Jewish feast of Pentecost to the healing of a man who had been lame from birth. As I said, thousands believed and joined the Apostles. (I do not say “disciples” now, but “apostles,” because they were no longer just learners, but messengers.) Well, the story does not always continue so triumphantly. God seems to choose to work through the weakest, most unlikely vessels. I do not claim to understand why, but it is a consistent pattern and so must be intentional. And when using flawed instruments, you must expect some missteps. But let us continue.

After Peter and John were released from prison, all the community rejoiced, and 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. Many gave everything they had into the Apostles’ safekeeping. There was one man – Joseph from Cyprus – 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, in Aramaic, Barnabas. You should take note of that name.

For a while, I imagine, it felt like heaven had come to earth, with everyone sharing everything and making sure everyone was taken care of, but unfortunately, people who have trusted in Christ are still people. And we people are remarkably gifted at taking what is good and healthy and twisting it some way for our own benefit – for money, power, or admiration. There was one couple in that early group named Ananias and Sapphira. They saw how respected Barnabas had become, at least partly for his generous gift from a sale of property, and they envied him. So they went and sold some land, too, so they could give money to the Apostles in the same way. Unlike Barnabas, though, they set some of the money aside for themselves and agreed not to tell anyone about that. Ananias took the portion they had agreed on, laid it at Peter’s feet, and declared that it was the full amount from the sale.

Now, I don’t know how Peter knew that Ananias was lying. Of course, it could have been a revelation from the Spirit, but I’ve heard Peter tell the story, and he never said that. Maybe he heard it from a friend of the buyer or something. At any rate, he knew. “Why are you doing this, Ananias? Nobody required you to sell your land. And when you sold it, nobody required you to give all the proceeds to us. So why pretend? Why would you try to lie to God?” At these words 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 to declare, 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. 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, not wanting to use force on people who could apparently wave prison doors open, so they asked politely, and the Apostles agreed to go chat with the council, if that’s what they wanted.

It didn’t go well for the priests. 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 appear, 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 like all the others. 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, in those days before Jerusalem was destroyed by Titus, the Jews were a divided people. On the one hand were those who’d been raised in Judea, and on the other were Jews from Africa or Asia or Europe. These non-Judean Jews were less picky about some of the laws, and they often spoke Greek 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 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 from the Greek faction – called them “Servants” and put them in charge. The names of the seven Servants were: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus. I offer the whole list even though you’ll probably never hear again about the last five. Those five, I assume, 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 the other two, and I’ll start with Stephen.

Everyone I’ve talked to describes Stephen as “full of grace and power.” He was a charismatic and eloquent member of a Greek synagogue in Jerusalem. Stephen began preaching about Christ – that he was the Messiah and that the Messiah had been different and more than the Jews had ever imagined. The man knew his scripture, too: 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. I imagine these Jesus people were getting on their last nerve. The chief priest glared at Stephen. “Blasphemy, eh? How do you plead?”

You’d think the chief priest would have learned better. Every time he asked a question of the Jesus people, he got a sermon. Sure enough, Stephen began to preach. Here’s the gist: he 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.

Some of this story may be new to you, Theophilus, but it was utterly familiar and completely non-controversial to the council and the Jewish crowd listening to Stephen. But Stephen didn’t stop there. 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 building, which God had explicitly told them not to do, because God can’t be confined to a temple. Now, this is in the Hebrew scriptures, but it was not popular to point it out 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!”

That 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. You might jot that name down, too.

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 Servant Philip, who went north to Samaria. Now you probably remember from the first book I sent you how the Jews felt about Samaritans – they hated them – but Philip apparently didn’t care, 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.

When word filtered back to Jerusalem, the Apostles 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.

Meanwhile, the Servant Philip 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.

This seems like a good place to wrap up. If it feels to you as if the Apostles are still fumbling around in the dark, trying to figure things out, you're not wrong. But, with the Spirit's help, they do start to get a handle on it soon.

Until my next letter, your friend Luke.