

Acts 4

The Church Resists Authoritarian Mandates

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, October 20, 2021
(John and Florence Fuiten were married 81 years ago today)

The miracle of healing the crippled man brought a great preaching opportunity for Peter and John which they seized upon to great effect including annoying the political and religious elites. In this chapter we have the pushback trying to silence Christians and how they responded. The story might indicate how Christians in other times might respond to political and religious oppression and mandates.

The Sadducees attack starts the chapter. *1 The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. 2 They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. 3 They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. 4 But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.*

The Sadducees would be comparable to today's liberal, left-wing church. They hardly believed the Bible and certainly did not believe in the resurrection. The Sadducees were from the leading families of the nation-- the priests, merchants, and aristocrats. These were the educated leaders of the Jews. In Acts 5:17 we learn that the "high priest and all his associates" were members of the party of the Sadducees. This was the intellectual and political ruling class. They got along well with the Romans and didn't like people upsetting their favored status and situation.

The teaching of the Apostles troubled them on two accounts. First, it bothered them that the Apostles were presuming to teach. After all, they were not recognized as leaders. Further, they were teaching a doctrine of which the Sadducees disapproved. They did not believe in an after-life at all.

The captain of the temple guard was Chief of the Temple police. It was one of the duties of the Levites, day and night, to guard the Temple gates to keep the unclean from entering. They had twenty-four stations about the gates and courts of which twenty one were manned by the Levites alone while the innermost three were jointly manned by the priests and Levites.¹ Their job was also to keep order.

This group had opposed Jesus and cooperated with Pilate in his crucifixion. Mark 15:1 tells us "...the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate." If they were the prime movers in his crucifixion, they can hardly be expected to be thrilled by talk of his resurrection. They decided they needed to silence Peter and John by means of arrest. They will try to figure out what to do with them later.

Peter was brought before the Sanhedrin to give an account. *"5 The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. 6 Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. 7 They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?" 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the*

¹ Edersheim, Alfred. *The Temple, Its Ministries and Services* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1986) page 147-148.

people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 11 He is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone." 12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

The lead against Peter and John is taken by the Annas, the High Priest and his son-in-law, Caiaphas. After He was arrested, Jesus was taken to Caiaphas' house and held overnight. It was in that house that the guards mocked and beat Him.

Even with the history of what this family had done to Jesus just weeks before, Peter and John do not hesitate to speak up. They present an unequivocal gospel account. First, Jesus Christ has healed the lame man. Second, Jesus Christ has been crucified and raised from the dead. They knew they had crucified him. Now they were presented with the challenge of his resurrection. Thirdly, prophecy says he was the rejected stone which became the capstone. Verse 12 is probably the most important verse in the Bible. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved"

There is no other way to be saved. There is no other person who can provide the way of salvation. The Sadducees were great fans of Moses. They did not accept anyone else from Jewish history as authoritative on salvation. Peter attacks that position directly and immediately. He leaves no doubt that this council must turn to Jesus in order to be saved. Their old ways no longer produce salvation.

The reference to the capstone has deep roots. It is from the Psalms where it is given its salvation theme. In that case, it relates to the gates of righteousness, the means by which the righteous enter in. Peter gives it the same application, but makes Jesus the gate through which the righteous enter heaven. *Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter. I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation. The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.*²

Recent archaeology has made discoveries relating to Caiaphas. The picture is of the ossuary or stone burial box of Caiaphas discovered in the early 1990s.³ In a cave uncovered in Jerusalem they found a number of ossuaries apparently all associated with this family. There were five ossuaries that had inscriptions. There were two women, Miryam berat and Shimron and Shlom..... with the full version likely being Shlomzion. There were two ossuaries with the family name, Qafa, which is Caiaphas in Greek. The one shown here has a very intricate and rare pattern. Inside were the bones of six different people. Two infants, a small child aged 2-5, a teenaged boy, an adult woman and an adult man about age 60. On the undecorated end is inscribed "Joseph bar Caiaphas," with "bar" not necessarily meaning "son of" in this case but indicating a nickname which became the family name. An interesting footnote from this time period is that among all literary sources and inscriptions 28% of men had one of four names with Joseph and Shimon being the two most popular and nine names accounting for 44% of men. Half of women were either named Miryam (Mary) or Shlomzion



² Psalm 118:19-23

³ Biblical Archaeology Review Sept/Oct 1992: "Burial Cave of the Caiaphas Family."

(Salome in Greek.) A coin of Herod Agrippa I (37-44 AD) dates the find to the period of Jesus. The fact of ossuaries is also exclusive to the first century AD which also puts this at the time of Jesus.

Authoritarian Mandates were attempts to get Peter and John to shut up. *“13 When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. 14 But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. 15 So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. 16 “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. 17 But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name.” 18 Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John replied, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. 20 For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” 21 After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. 22 For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.*

Peter and John were a problem for the Sanhedrin. On the one hand, they were ordinary, uneducated men. Yet they are speaking with great courage and not a little insight. The Sanhedrin regarded the miracle that had been done as too strong an evidence to dismiss them as frauds. The whole city was aware of it and ascribed supernatural force to it, accepting the disciples teaching about Jesus. The situation reminds me of what the Lord said to Paul in Corinth some years later. *“For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.”*⁴ Especially to leaders, crowds influence their decisions.

The Sanhedrin decided to rely upon their natural authority and forbade speaking in the name of Jesus. Peter and John rejected the command the moment it was given. God had commanded them to speak as witnesses. They boldly proclaimed their intentions and no amount of threat could dissuade them from it. Again, the popular support prevented the leaders from doing what they wanted to do to Peter and John.

The Christian Prayer was in Response to Persecution. *“23 On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. 24 When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. 25 You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.’ 27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. 28 They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. 29 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. 30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”*

In the face of the threat of persecution, the Christians’ prayer is remarkable. It shows such faith in God and his supreme power. It is not a timid prayer but one prayed with their voices lifted up. It was a strong prayer in every way.

⁴ Acts 18:10

The first appeal in prayer recognizes **the greatness of God**. He is the creator of all that is. Heaven and earth belong to him and everything in heaven and earth. That's a good place to start. The second part of their prayer recognizes **the authority of Scripture**. When David spoke, it was by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Peter would later write this very thing. *"Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."*⁵

Thirdly, they understood that **the attack was not against them personally**, but against the Lord himself. This is what David had prophesied. God was in charge. The Sanhedrin was simply carrying out their terrible function, much like Pharaoh of Egypt. They had acted against the Lord himself and this was just the residue of that attack. The attack against the Lord had eventually come to nothing and they were expecting the same here. Verse 28 even strips the Sanhedrin of the power over their own decision. *"They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."*

In light of these things, the disciples had no interest in backing down. This was a plain confrontation between good and evil. While they did not deny that the Sanhedrin could hurt them or even kill them, their vision was eternal. They knew a further confrontation was coming and they were calling in divine reinforcements. This next request strikes me as an incredibly courageous and powerful request. *"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."* For their part, they want to be enabled to speak without hesitation or weakness. For God's part, they want demonstrations of the Spirit as confirmations.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that such demonstrations are for the purpose of confirming salvation. *"This salvation...was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."*⁶ The disciples are preaching salvation through Jesus Christ. They are simply asking God to weigh in on the discussion. By his response, it seems he was willing.

God Responded to the Prayer. *31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*

I don't know what Luke means when he tells us the place was shaken. It must not be that merely the people were shaken. The place itself is shaken. Some physical thing must have happened that reminded them of the Pentecost experience.

The result is that all the people were filled with the Holy Spirit. Frequently in the New Testament, when someone is said to be filled with the Spirit, they speak in some manner. For example in Acts 13:9-10 Paul, *"filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 'You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?'"* In that case Paul's ability to speak is related to being filled with the Spirit. We know what it is to be able to speak under the power of the Holy Spirit. It seems fairly clear that speaking is a direct result of being filled with the Spirit. These disciples want to be able to speak boldly. God responds by filling them with the Holy Spirit.

⁵ 2 Pet 1:20-21.

⁶ Hebrews 2:3-4.

Christian Unity and Spiritual Growth were the results. “32 *All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.* 33 *With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.* 34 *There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales* 35 *and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.* 36 *Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement),* 37 *sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.* (NIV)

In this primitive church, there was a great sense of unity. They had a common Lord and a common enemy. They knew they had to stand with each other. Their common sense of being Christians was even greater than any sense of private ownership. It was all for one and one for all. Luke tells us about the sharing that went on, so much so that no one was left in need. Everyone had the basic necessities. Since caring for the poor was the first act of righteousness, it is clear these people were highly motivated toward the righteous life. They were on fire and showed it by their care for the needy within their midst.

The sale of lands and houses is always very significant. Some think this was a year of Jubilee. If so, the land sold would not be returned to the family for another 50 years, a full lifetime for those present. It would have brought the maximum price without discounts that would develop the closer they got to the next Jubilee. We should note the degree to which the people started acting in righteous ways following being filled with the Spirit. Their care for the poor showed they wanted to live the righteous life. The most important act of the righteous life is to remember the poor. They have clearly been touched because of their high level of motivation to act in this way.

Joseph or Barnabas was among those who sold a field for the benefit of the poor. We could see this as an extension of the previous discussion about selling property. It is related to that but it might also be something else. Joseph was a Levite. Luke may want us to see a second working of the Holy Spirit. In this case, Joseph may be abandoning his relationship to the Temple. His property, probably located near Jerusalem and the Temple, may have been sold because he could see that his ministry was to the larger Christian community. Already he had been living in Cyprus. Now he further severs his ties to the Temple. The Lord is his portion now. He no longer needs this land.

*“The LORD said to Aaron, ‘You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites.’”*⁷ Joseph turned this into reality.

Some have relied upon this experience to suggest that these were the original communists. “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” It was a strictly voluntary thing of which communists know nothing. Further, it was a rather short-lived thing (as were the lives of Ananias and Sapphira) for good reason. It should hardly have been seen as an economic model for society.

It is true, however, that care for the poor is a good sign of spiritual life. When we care about other people, it means we are on track with the Lord. It is a good way to evaluate the extent to which the Spirit is filling our lives right now.

⁷ Numbers 18:20. There were 48 cities in which the Levites lived. Six of these were cities of refuge. Nearby places like Bethel may have been where Joseph had his property.

