

2. The Jerusalem congregation identified Stephen along with six other men to assume oversight of the daily distribution of food to the widows among them. The saints found him to be “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (6:3), and God affirmed Stephen’s selection by granting him abundant grace and power in the Spirit. Far from merely assisting in the work of equitably distributing the Church’s resources, Stephen – a man “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (6:5) – became an instrument of the Spirit’s supernatural witness to Christ by performing “great wonders and signs” (6:8). Though Luke didn’t identify Stephen as an apostle (as he did Barnabas; ref. 14:14), he clearly ministered among the people with the same presence and power as manifested by the apostles. That being the case, it was only a matter of time before Stephen attracted the same scrutiny and opposition from the Jews as the apostles had.

In Stephen, God had raised up another powerful witness to His Son, but His purpose with this particular witness was that he should have the privilege of being the first to testify of Jesus, not only in word and deed, but in *death*. Stephen had been chosen to be Christ’s first martyr, which is the highest form of witness (the word “martyr” comes from the Greek stem indicating witness or testimony). In this regard, every witness to Christ is a martyr; death for His name’s sake is simply its superlative form (cf. Acts 1:8, 22, 2:32, 3:15, 4:33, 5:32, etc.). Peter and John had first drawn the attention and ire of the Jewish authorities; Stephen would be the first to endure the full measure of their indignation.

- a. Luke noted that the opposition to Stephen arose from a particular group of Jews, some of whom were associated with the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Jews who were former slaves) (6:9). The entire group were non-Palestinian, and it is interesting that Luke juxtaposed an account of *internal* conflict involving Hellenistic Jews with one of *external* conflict involving Jews of similar heritage. One must be careful to not read too much into this, but it does serve to draw the two contexts together, highlighting all the more the reciprocating pattern of Luke’s narrative: his alternation between the Church’s life with its corresponding internal challenges and threats and its external witness and resulting persecution.
- b. Luke provided no explanation of how these Jews came into contact with Stephen or, more importantly, what their particular point of contention was. Clearly, in his judgment that issue was irrelevant; what Luke wanted to convey was the depth and unassailability of Stephen’s insight and the power of his speech, both of which were the work of the Spirit (6:10). In this regard, some maintain Luke used the word “spirit” here as a metaphor for an inward quality or attitude in Stephen himself (cf. 17:16, 18:25, 20:22, etc.). Two things argue against this interpretation and support the conclusion that Luke was referring to the Holy Spirit:
 - 1) The first is the *immediate context*: Luke has already described Stephen as a man “full of the Spirit” who performed great wonders by the power of the Spirit. If his testimony of Jesus in mighty works was by the Spirit, shouldn’t the same be assumed of his verbal witness? Luke directly suggests this by Stephen’s summary declaration that his opponents, like their Jewish forefathers, were guilty of resisting the Holy Spirit (7:51).

- 2) The second is the *larger context*: To this point in his account, Luke has used the term “spirit” only in reference to the Holy Spirit (except in 5:16), and he would have recognized that an abrupt change in meaning without clear indication would leave his narrative ambiguous and liable to misunderstanding. Even more than that, Luke has been careful to everywhere attribute the believers’ witness to Christ to the leading and empowerment of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1:4-8, 2:1-18, 4:8-12, 31, 5:29-32).

The context leaves no doubt that Luke was here speaking of the Holy Spirit, and his point was to highlight the divine source of Stephen’s insight and wisdom. His opponents could not withstand his argumentation precisely because he spoke under the guidance and power of the Spirit of God. *Luke was conspicuously silent regarding the content of Stephen’s argument with these Jews, but he stressed its source and power.* In this way, he laid the foundation for the sermon to come and also made it the focal point of the entire context: There the reader discovers the content and approach of Stephen’s witness to Jesus as the Christ, and there he is reminded that Stephen’s discernment of Jesus “in all the Scriptures” – evident in his sermon – came from the Spirit Himself and expressed the wisdom of God (ref. 1 Corinthians 1:18-24; Colossians 1:9-2:3; cf. also Romans 11:33-36 as Paul’s crowning doxology to his discussion of God’s purpose in Christ in chaps. 9-11).

Israel’s rulers had failed in their repeated efforts to stop the Spirit’s testimony by silencing His apostolic mouthpieces; so also these Diaspora Jews could not withstand the Spirit’s insight and wisdom as He testified to Jesus of Nazareth by the mouth of His servant Stephen.

- Were this testimony nothing more than the musings of men, it could be withstood – by time if not by force (ref. again 5:35-37).
- But being the witness of the Spirit of God, it would prevail and succeed in its mission to winnow the sons of men (5:38-39; cf. John 15:18-27).

What God had affirmed to Isaiah concerning His word of salvation (55:10-11), Jesus later pledged to His disciples (Luke 21:10-15, cf. also 12:11-12). That enduring promise of the triumph of the gospel was now being fulfilled in Stephen just as with the Twelve, for it depends not upon “*superiority of speech*” or “*persuasive words of wisdom,*” but the “*demonstration of the Spirit and power.*”

- c. Being unable to refute Stephen’s gospel with their argumentation, these men went away that day determined to find another device against him. They found it in the weapon of false witness. Specifically, they induced certain individuals to propagate the charge that Stephen was speaking blasphemous things against Moses, the Law, the holy place, and even God Himself (6:11). They knew that a charge of that sort would spread like wildfire and provoke the indignation of the people as well as Israel’s leadership; just as expected, a cohort soon organized to seize Stephen and drag him before the assembled Council.

There, recapitulating Jesus' own experience, and in fulfillment of His warning to His disciples, false witnesses stood up before Israel's rulers and accused Stephen of speaking against "*this holy place and the Law.*"

- The same basic accusation that had been brought against Jesus at His own trial (and throughout His ministry) was again being laid at His feet, this time as being promoted through His disciple. That day it was Stephen called to account; many years later it would be Paul (6:13-14; cf. Matthew 26:59-61 and Acts 21:27-28, 25:1-8).
 - Furthermore, Stephen's mock trial under false witnesses resulted from the sons of Israel turning on him just as they had done with his Lord before him. Up until this time, Jesus' witnesses had enjoyed the favor and support of the people (ref. 2:42-47, 3:9-11, 5:12-26); now, for the first time, the opponents of the gospel were able to gain support for themselves and their cause (6:12). So it had been with Jesus: The crowds that had praised Him and welcomed Him into Jerusalem with shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David" cried out for His crucifixion only a few days later.
- d. The men testifying before the Council were put forth as false witnesses, *and yet their testimony wasn't devoid of all truth*. This is an important observation that highlights how the unregenerate Jewish mind was hearing and processing the gospel witness coming to them. It also explains how those who previously supported and praised the apostles and the Church so quickly turned against them.
- To the extent that they were able to consider Christ's followers and their message within the framework of their own Judaism and Jewish convictions, the Jewish populace weren't at all troubled by what they were seeing and hearing. Jesus' disciples were humble, kind and loving sons of Israel; how could anyone object to that? Even more, the God of Israel was working miracles of healing and deliverance through these individuals, and that was surely something to embrace and celebrate.
 - Now, however, the people were being told that, far from being faithful Israelites, these disciples of Jesus of Nazareth were actively seeking to undermine and perhaps even overthrow Judaism and the things most sacred in it. They were actually opponents of Moses and the Law and were committed to the fulfillment of Jesus' pronouncement regarding the destruction of the temple. This made them enemies of Yahweh Himself, for Moses was His servant and mouthpiece, the Law His enduring and binding revelation to men, and the temple His holy dwelling place.

Nothing could have been more shocking and outrageous – indeed, blasphemous – to the natural Jewish mind (6:11); whatever the exemplary behavior and miraculous works of these followers of Jesus, faithfulness to the God of Israel demands that such men be put to death and their poisonous teaching silenced.

But as spectacular and caricatured as these charges were, they did have a certain basis in truth. Jesus *had* claimed authority over Moses and the Law (cf. Matthew 11:1-15, 19:3-9; Mark 7:17-19; John 5:45-47, 6:24-32, 8:1-7), and His teaching certainly took the Law's instruction in a different direction ("You have heard it said, but *I* say to you"). Jesus knew how His teaching would appear to the sons of Israel, and so prefaced His treatment of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount (5:21-48) with the exhortation to His hearers not to conclude that He had come to abrogate the Law (5:17). From one vantage point, it was undeniable that Jesus was indeed "altering the customs which Moses handed down" (6:14).

Jesus had also proclaimed the destruction of the temple. He did so indirectly at first by insisting that Yahweh's sanctuary had now found its own fulfillment in Him, thereby rendering the physical temple in Jerusalem obsolete and of no account (John 4:19-24). From that same perspective, Jesus had declared that the temple would be torn down and He would rebuild it in three days (John 2:18-19). That particular claim became the basis for one of the charges against Him (Matthew 26:59-61, 27:38-40). Later on, however, He did speak directly and explicitly about the coming desolation and destruction of the Jerusalem temple (Matthew 24:1-2; cf. Luke 19:41-44, 21:20-24, 23:27-31), and the spectacular nature of that prophecy would have given wings to His words. When, therefore, the charge was leveled against Stephen that he was promoting Jesus' claim about destroying the temple, the people had every reason to believe it.

These charges understandably raised the ire of the "faithful" in Israel; in one respect, their outrage was misplaced, but in another it was entirely warranted. They were wrong in concluding that Jesus' disciples were following His lead in allegedly seeking to overthrow Moses and the Law and even Yahweh Himself by tearing down His sanctuary. As with their Lord, the Church's message of "this new life" in Jesus of Nazareth wasn't one of abrogation – either of Moses, the Law, or the Scriptures, but of *fulfillment*. If the Jews didn't yet understand this, they certainly would by the time Stephen completed his magnificent defense.

But, for this very reason, the Jews *were* justified in their concern. If all things pertaining to Israel and the Jewish religion had indeed found their fulfillment in this man Jesus, then clinging to Judaism amounted to clinging to a corpse. Worse than that, it meant that Abraham's covenant sons had misunderstood their own Scripture and were actually opposing the kingdom promised by the Law and Prophets. And to oppose God's kingdom is to oppose God Himself.

- e. Stephen understood the gravity of the charges against him and what was at stake. Nevertheless, he was unmoved and gloriously resolute. The Spirit had testified of Christ through Stephen's works and word, and now He was testifying through his person: In a scene of agitation and distraction, all gazes were drawn to Stephen's face, described by Luke as like the face of an angel (6:15). This depiction implies more than quiet composure; his face likely shone with a supernatural radiance – perhaps as God's own answer to the charges (cf. 6:13-14 with Exodus 34:29).