

- d. These rulers of Israel were convinced that they were servants of Yahweh and disciples of Moses. They had congratulated themselves that they were honoring God and His Law when they withstood Jesus of Nazareth, and they were doing the same thing now with Stephen. But by rehearsing Israel's history in their presence, Stephen was showing his accusers that their perspective was flawed and their convictions misguided; they, not he, Jesus, or His followers, were the blasphemers and opponents of Moses, the Law, and the holy place for the simple reason that they failed to recognize and embrace the truth that they – as the entire Old Testament economy – had attained their ordained destiny in Jesus Christ.

Stephen's point should have been evident to them from the way he constructed his narrative, but he made it explicit with his concluding denunciation (7:51-53). The heart of his indictment was that these pompous leaders – men who self-righteously distinguished themselves from their forefathers' unbelief and rebellion – were cut from exactly the same cloth; for all their protests and pretensions, they were bona fide sons of their fathers.

- 1) Stephen indicated this first by the description he assigned to them: They were men who were "*stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears*" (7:51). The first adjective connotes stubbornness to the point of intransigence. Like a horse that can't be turned from its course with even the strongest hand on the bridle, a "stiff-necked" person is determined and unyielding, utterly incapable of being prevailed upon.

The concept of uncircumcision complements this imagery. Circumcision was instituted as the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant and signified a person's entire consecration (separation) to God as His holy possession. These rulers of Israel – consistent with the nation as a whole – had "*uncircumcised hearts and ears*" in the sense that they were bent upon their own interests and agenda. They were consecrated to themselves.

- The "uncircumcised heart" speaks of the natural, autonomous human condition in which every person is ultimately his own "god"; in this respect, all the nations were uncircumcised, but the circumcised sons of Israel were to live out their circumcision by lives of devotion to their God. But alas, Israel was circumcised in the flesh, but not in the heart; though Yahweh was king in Israel, "every man "did what was right in his own eyes" (cf. Leviticus 26:13-42 with Judges 21:24-25 and Jeremiah 9:25-26).

- Such persons have "uncircumcised ears" in that they cannot "hear" any words that are not compatible with their own disposition, desires and determination. A self-willed heart inevitably results in a selectively sensitive ear – an ear that is able to filter out what it doesn't want to hear and interprets what it does hear in a manner that is self-vindicating and self-serving.

Contemporary readers may miss the impact of Stephen's words, but they wouldn't have been lost on the Council. They were charging Stephen with opposing Moses and even God Himself; Stephen was indicating that both Moses and Moses' God were opposing *them*. For Stephen's description of these leaders was the very language Yahweh and His servant Moses had used in condemning the sons of Israel (cf. Exodus 32:9, 33:1-5, 34:8-9; Deuteronomy 9:1ff, 10:14-16; etc.). Self-deception and rationalization may have allowed Stephen's accusers to distance themselves from their stiff-necked, tone deaf forefathers, but God knew the truth.

- 2) Stephen's description hinted at the issue in their obstinacy, but he went on to state it directly: *They were guilty of continually resisting the Holy Spirit*. Their fathers had done so by refusing to listen to God's prophets to the point of slaying them (7:52a; cf. 7:35-39); these contemporary rulers had followed in their footsteps by doing the same thing to the preeminent Prophet (7:52b). He had come as promised and spoken Yahweh's words and done His works in the power of His Spirit; in response, Israel's leaders had rejected Him and put Him to death (John 5:1-18, 9:1-11:53; etc.).

Now they were poised to eradicate those who insisted upon perpetuating Jesus' words and works (ref. again 1:1-2; cf. Matthew 23:29-39). Stephen stood before the Council speaking to them under the leading of the Holy Spirit (cf. 7:55 with 6:15), and they responded to him as they had responded to Jesus – the same way their forefathers had responded to the Spirit when He spoke through Yahweh's prophets of old. So Stephen associated himself with the Israelite fathers in their Abrahamic privilege and calling (note his expression, "*our fathers*," in vv. 38-39), but he explicitly exempted himself from their resistance to God's revealed purpose in salvation history. In this respect, those men were not his fathers, but the fathers of his accusers: "You are doing just as *your* fathers did."

Like their forefathers, Israel's elders and rulers wrongly concluded that obedience to the Law meant meticulous adherence to its commandments and ordinances. Having unregenerate minds, they regarded it as a collection of regulations rather than what it really was: *a body of prophetic and pedagogical revelation given to instruct and oversee the sons of Israel during the time of preparation leading up to the coming of the promised Seed of Abraham*. The Law of Moses was entirely christological, serving the promise as prophet, pedagogue, handmaiden and herald (Galatians 3:15-4:11, 21-31; cf. Matthew 11:1-15).

In the age of preparation, obedience to the Law involved submissive and confident faith in Yahweh in the context of His promise of the righteousness to be revealed and realized in His Servant (Hebrews 11:1-40). Now, in the age of fulfillment, obedience to the Law involves faith in Jesus (John 6:27-29; 1 John 3:21-23) – the prophesied Servant whose coming has ushered in everlasting righteousness – not only *in* Himself, but *through* Himself unto the whole creation (cf. Daniel 9:24 with Romans 3:21-26; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 9:1-12).

The Law revealed and demanded faith and love; stated simply, it defined and prescribed authentic *sonship* (cf. Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:1-14). God had determined to take Abraham's descendents as His sons, set apart to live with Him in undistracted devotion (Genesis 17:1-8). This sonship became explicit when those descendents were corporatized in the covenant nation of Israel (cf. Exodus 4:22, 15:17, 25:1-8; Leviticus 26:1-13). But the sons of Israel were sons of God in name only; like the rest of mankind, the collective nation remained estranged from Him. *And estrangement results in self-isolation and a self-referential existence in which the person himself is his true object of trust and devotion* (ref. again 7:39-43; cf. Hosea 11:1-4). This condition manifested itself in every aspect of Israel's existence, including the way it conceived and approached the Law.

The Law set forth the demand of faith and love, but, in their true form, these are foreign and unfathomable concepts to unregenerate men. Alienation precludes authentic relationship, and faith and love exist only in the context of relationship. Having no capacity to love or trust God (and being incapable of even really discerning what those concepts mean), the sons of Israel were consigned to perceive and interact with the Law in a manner suited to their alienation. And what that meant was turning God's demand of relational intimacy and fidelity – the obligation of *sonship* – into the demand of personal righteousness.

In their estranged state, human beings are self-isolated and self-enslaved, having no choice but to take a self-referential view of all things. So Israel (as representative of all men) regarded the Law as calling them to look upon and reach out to themselves rather than to their Father. Rather than seeing the Law for what it was – a pedagogue directing them toward Christ – the sons of Israel regarded the Law as the means of their own righteousness (Romans 9:1-10:13). The nation of Israel (as also Stephen's accusers) had effectively made *antichrist* that which was entirely christological. Rejecting Jesus of Nazareth, they showed themselves to be consummate law-breakers (7:52-53; cf. again Galatians 4:21ff); false sons who in everything refused and opposed God's Spirit (Isaiah 63:7-10).

Stephen's accusations enraged the Sanhedrin (7:54, cf. 5:33), but their indignation was pushed to the breaking point by his heavenly vision (7:55-56). If there had been any doubt regarding the divine authority he was claiming for his defense and countercharge, any such doubt evaporated when he declared to them that he saw "*the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.*"

Throughout his rehearsal of Israel's history Stephen had been careful to not mention Jesus, bringing Him into the discussion only when he condemned the men of the Sanhedrin for betraying and murdering Him. But his point was clear: This man whom they put to death is the Righteous One the entire salvation history foretold and promised – the Servant and royal Branch of David who is the substance and source of life and righteousness for every created thing (cf. Daniel 7:13-14 with Psalm 2, 110, Ezekiel 34:23-24, 37:21-25 and Revelation 5:1-10; cf. also Ephesians 1:18-21; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 1:1-3, 2:9).

This was an extraordinary claim in itself, but now Stephen was effectively adding God's witness to his own. This Jesus, crucified as a blasphemer and false prophet, was showing Himself alive, exalted and enthroned at Yahweh's right hand; God had indeed made Him *Lord* as well as Christ (ref. 2:29-36). Those who had sought to destroy Him only managed to secure His triumph.

All of this was more than the Council could bear. Stephen could not be permitted to speak further, and for the moment that meant muting his words by shouting over them and covering their uncircumcised ears. But a more permanent solution was needed; this blasphemer must be silenced forever. And so, rushing upon him as one man, the men of the Sanhedrin dragged him from their chamber and out of the city of Jerusalem (7:57-58). Jewish opposition to Christ's Church and gospel had at last come to the boiling point. *But as they had done with Jesus, these rulers and their minions congratulated themselves that they were honoring the Law even while making it the servant of their own self-righteousness.*

The Law prescribed the death penalty for blasphemy (Leviticus 24:10-16), but Stephen's accusers assumed the sole prerogative for making that determination. So it had been with Jesus when He proclaimed the things Stephen was witnessing and declaring to them (Matthew 26:59-65). As well, blasphemy rendered a person unclean, and the cleanliness laws prescribed that the unclean offender be removed from the camp (cf. Exodus 29:14; Leviticus 10:1-5; Numbers 5:1-3; Deuteronomy 23:10-12; etc.). The blasphemer Jesus had been executed outside Jerusalem, and so it would be with Stephen (ref. John 19:14-17; cf. Hebrews 13:11-12). Finally, witnesses were to cast the first stone (Deuteronomy 17:6-7), and the Council wasn't about to let the chaotic situation distract them from this obligation (7:58).

Like his Master, Stephen was driven out of Jerusalem to be executed, but his execution lacked the calm calculation and orderliness of Jesus'. The Romans had stripped the Jewish authorities of the power of capital punishment (ref. John 18:28-31), but in the fury of the moment the Council completely lost sight of that restriction. Israel's pious and dignified leaders had been reduced to a frenzied mob overcome with self-righteous outrage.

Stephen's testimony to Jesus that day began with the Scripture's witness to Him in the unfolding salvation history. From there it advanced to his personal witness in connection with a heavenly vision. But it would reach its apex when the stones began to fly. Stephen had testified of his Lord in life and he would do so in death. He was suffering as Jesus had suffered precisely because he shared in His life and likeness, and now the Spirit's work of transformation was nearly complete.

Looking upon his murderers with Christ's eyes and regarding them with His heart of love and compassion, Stephen cried out to his Lord on their behalf as He had cried out to His Father in His own agony. And coming to his last breath, Stephen delivered his spirit into the loving hands of his Savior, even as Jesus had entrusted His to His beloved Father (7:59-60; cf. Luke 23:34, 46).