

As we've been examining the book of Acts, we've noticed that Luke goes back and forth in describing various oppositions within and without the church. In chapter 4, we saw the arrest of Peter and John; and then in chapter 5 we saw the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira. Later in chapter 5 we saw the arrest of the 12 apostles and their beating; and then in the beginning of chapter 6 we saw the controversy between the Hebrews and Hellenists. And now again, in vv8-18 we find the arrest of Stephen. In fact, as we shall see next week, while we have the actual arrest of Stephen in 6:8-15, we will find his defense in chapter 7:1-53, and then his death in vv54-60.

Thus, we learn from these chapters, the church always faces two types of opposition—the first comes from within, and the second from without. From within there are often hypocrites and the possibility of strife and contention, and from without there's the certainty of hatred, persecution, and mistreatment.

And so, in coming to 6:8-15 and the arrest of Stephen, I want to consider this passage under four main headings: A Description (v8); A Dispute (vv9-10); A Deception (vv11-14); A Vindication (v15). I then want to close with a few practical observations.

I. A Description (v8)

II. A Dispute (vv9-10)

III. A Deception (vv11-14)

IV. A Vindication (v15)

I. A Description (v8)

1. V8—"And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people"—if you remember, we were introduced to Stephen back in v5.
2. He was one of seven men chosen to function as deacons in the young but growing assembly in Jerusalem.
3. (1) His name—the name Stephen literally means "crown" or "crowned"—it's a rather popular Greek name.
4. Thus, it appears Stephen was a Hellenist Jew, or a Jew who natively spoke Greek instead of Hebrew.
5. While most of these Jews came from regions outside of Jerusalem, by this time, there were many Greek speaking Jews from Jerusalem.
6. Thus, regardless if he was raised outside or inside Jerusalem, he was raised in Greek education and culture.
7. (2) His person—Luke describes him as "full of faith and power"—there's a textual variant so that the NASB and ESV have "full of grace and power."
8. It makes little difference as faith is a grace, which simply means, faith is a gift that's given from God.
9. From v5 we learned he was not only full of faith but also "the Holy Spirit"—this means, this grace came from the Spirit.
10. To be full of the Holy Spirit, is to be full of grace, which includes faith, wisdom, patience, and hope.
11. Luke says he was "full of faith and power"—by "power" is meant "spiritual strength and ability"—because he was Spirit-filled he was spiritually strong.
12. Or, because he was full of faith, he was full of power, as faith is the means whereby, we are made strong.
13. It's likely that Luke uses the term "power" here in a more limited way, to refer to the ability to perform miracles.

14. (3) His ministry—"And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people."
15. The ability to do great wonders and signs was the result of being filled with the Holy Spirit and power.
16. Acts 1:8—"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."
17. Thus, Paul says in Rom.15:19, that Christ worked through him "in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God."
18. Now, if you remember, the primary purpose of these "signs and wonders" was to vindicate the preached word.
19. It's for this reason, throughout the book of Acts, we read about the "signs and wonders of the apostles."
20. Here we find one of the few times when signs and wonders are done by a person, other than an apostle.
21. And, I think the reason being, Stephen was not only ordained as one of the first deacons, but he was also an evangelist.
22. Eph.4:11—"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastor-teachers."
23. For two-thousand years the church has understood that apostles and prophets were foundational to the church—this means, there are no longer any living apostles and prophets.
24. And generally speaking, the church has also understood that the role of evangelist was a temporary role.
25. Evangelists accompanied and assisted apostles, and were thusly able to perform great signs and wonders.
26. John Calvin—"Apostles, Prophets, and Evangelists were bestowed on the church for a limited time only. But without Pastors and Teachers there can be no government of the church."
27. (a) He was faithful as a deacon—Stephen began his responsibilities in the church by serving tables.
28. Now, let me clarify—I do not understand the office of deacon as a testing ground for future preachers.
29. No—the office of deacon is an office in and of itself, and not merely a stepping stone to something better.
30. But here's my point—Scripture teaches that if we are faithful with little, we will be entrusted with more.
31. How many men come to a church and want to be preachers, but walk past an overflowing garbage can at lunch time.
32. Let us learn this basic principle from Stephen—only those faithful with little should be entrusted with more.
33. (b) He was equipped as a preacher—having proved himself as a faithful member, he was entrusted with additional responsibilities.
34. But here's the point I want to make—Christ equipped Stephen as a deacon, and He equipped Stephen as an evangelist.
35. When Christ calls a man to an office, He always equips that man to faithfully and diligently fulfill that office.
36. This is true of deacons and elders, but it's also true of every other calling—be it a husband, wife, or parent.
37. But you know, it's also true of that most basic calling, and that is to become a Christian—when Christ calls a person out of this world to Himself, He always provides all that they need to live and walk as Christian.

38. He doesn't call a man as a deacon or elder and not equip them; nor does he call as a husband or wife and not equip us; and nor does He call us as a Christian and not equip us.

II. A Dispute (vv9-10)

1. Beginning with v9, we are introduced to a new group of people identified as "the Synagogue of the Freedmen."
2. This likely refers to former slaves who've been liberated—Luke then describes them as largely coming from four places.
3. They were Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia—that is, people that natively came from these places.
4. They came from North Africa and Asia, and yet, they were Greek-speaking Jews, who were former slaves.
5. It seems, it was their former servitude that united them together, regardless of their varied nationalities.
6. Curtis Vaughan—"Stephen, probably a Grecian Jew, was associated with one of the synagogues frequented by Jews from the Dispersion. It is called 'the Synagogue of Freedmen, comprising Cyrenians and Alexandrians and people from Cilicia and Asia. The 'Freedmen' were Jews who once had been slaves or were sons of former slaves."
7. We read at the end of v9, these men "disputed with Stephen"—the word literally means "to discuss or reason together."
8. While it doesn't have to take the negative connotation of "arguing," I think here it means "to argue or debate."
9. V10—"And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke"—in other words, the wisdom he spoke with was from the Holy Spirit.
10. It was a divinely bestowed wisdom—a wisdom that came from the personal and powerful ministry of the Spirit.
11. Remember, he was full of the Spirit (v8), which means he was full of wisdom (v3), and full of faith (v5).
12. Thus, when Luke says they were not able to resist "the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke" he means the words or the gospel that Stephen spoke.
13. This doesn't mean that Stephen himself was so smart and cunning, that he could out-think his opponents.
14. But the wisdom he spoke was from God—it was simply the truth of the gospel as found in Scripture.
15. It was the truth—the truth about who God is; the truth about who Christ is; the truth about what salvation is.
16. But as we shall see here in a few minutes, it was especially the wisdom of God as made known in the gospel.
17. Now, it's true, the Holy Spirit enabled Stephen to speak these things in such a way that he was effective.
18. But the language of v10 is stronger than that—it was the Holy Spirit speaking in and through Stephen.
19. Yes, Stephen spoke—but it was by the Holy Spirit that he spoke—that is, he spoke the very words of God.
20. Mk.13:11—"But when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit."

21. Lk.21:14-15—"Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist."
22. Now, in both of these passages, our Savior promises the apostles supernatural aid and utterance in time of need.
23. These are unique promises made to the apostles, that the Holy Spirit Himself would speak through them.
24. Now, I plan to return to this point toward the end of the sermon, and show you how it relates to all Christians.
25. But, it's very important to understand, that there's a unique way in which these promises were fulfilled in the first century.
26. Christ promised, to fill His apostles (and close associates) with the Spirit in such a way to empower them to speak the wisdom of God.
27. He tells them not to even premeditate on what they will speak, because He will supernaturally give them the very words to say.

III. A Deception (vv11-14)

1. V11—"Then they secretly induced men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.'"
2. Because they were not able to resist his words, they persuaded men to lie about him and testify against him.
3. The heart of their false accusations concerned sacred things about the OC, that were idolized by the Jews.
4. Moses (v11), the temple and the law (v13)—we have all of these brought together in v14—"for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us."
5. Now, let me simply say at the outset that this was not true—neither Jesus nor Stephen taught these things.
6. Our Savior never said He was going to destroy the temple nor change the customs Moses delivered to them.
7. In fact, He actually taught the very opposite, Matt.5:17—"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets, I did not come to destroy but to fulfill."
8. Dennis Johnson—"Unable to best Stephen in open debate, his enemies resorted to perjury. They secretly instigated men – the verb implies brining witnesses to lie – to charge Stephen with speaking words of blasphemy against Moses and against God, in violation of Exodus 22:28—"Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people.'"
9. And yet, there are a few slivers of truth in what they allege: first, our Savior did foretell the destruction of the temple by the Romans; second, our Savior did come to fulfill the OC and enact the NC.
10. Thus, what these lies did was, they likely took things that they heard and purposefully distorted them.
11. Here's the bottom-line—most Jews failed to understand the fundamental purpose of the OC to point to Christ.
12. The NT teaches that the OC came to an historical end in the beginning of the New and better Covenant.
13. Unfortunately, most Jews put their hope in the OC as an end in itself, and not as a means to Christ and the NC.

14. Thus, all that the OC pointed to (Christ and the blessings of the NC), were rejected for the types and shadows.
15. And here's the problem—if all you have are the types and shadows, without their substance, all you have is a broken and empty covenant.
16. Moses pointed to Christ—the temple pointed to Christ—the law pointed to Christ—it all pointed to Christ.
17. John Scott—"What Jesus taught, then, was that the temple and the law would be superseded, meaning not that they had never been divine gifts in the first place, but that they would find their God-intended fulfilment in Him, the Messiah. Jesus was and is Himself the replacement of the temple and the fulfillment of the law. Moreover, to affirm that both temple and law pointed forward to Him and are now fulfilled in Him is to magnify their importance, not to denigrate it."

IV. A Vindication (v15)

1. V15—"And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel."
2. I take this to mean, there was an actual physical glow or glory that radiated from Stephen that was evident.
3. We have a similar thing in the OT—for example, we find in Ex.34:29, that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai after receiving the law—"his face shone while he talked with them."
4. This was in part, proof that Moses was in fact a prophet of God, and had received communication from God.
5. So too, I suggest, God is here giving evidence to the fact, that Stephen was a faithful servant of Christ.
6. John Stott—"It was God's deliberate purpose to give the same radiant face to Stephen when he was accused of opposing the law as He had given to Moses when he received the law. In this way God was showing that both Moses' ministry of the law and Stephen's interpretation of it had His approval."
7. (1) The wisdom of God is foolishness to man—this is true of all men by nature, be they religious or not.
8. This doesn't mean that native man rejects all forms of wisdom—native man may be wise in certain things.
9. But no man by nature accepts the wisdom of God as found within the gospel—this is always rejected.
10. And this is true of all men by nature, regardless if they are openly wicked, moral and decent, and even religious.
11. 1Cor.2:6-8—"However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."
12. Notice how Paul contrasts the wisdom of God with the wisdom of this age (or the wisdom of native man).
13. By "the rulers of this age" he means the wisdom of native man, and in particular, the Jewish leaders.
14. (a) The wisdom of God, v6—"We speak wisdom" v7—"We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory."
15. By "the wisdom of God" is meant the gospel, which is a mystery, or a message hidden if not revealed.

16. Furthermore, it was "ordained before the ages for our glory" and it concerned Christ as the Lord of glory.
17. Thus, the wisdom of God refers to God's way of salvation, that concerns faith in a crucified Savior.
18. (b) The wisdom of man—by "the wisdom of man" is meant, the way man believes salvation should be had.
19. Simply put, it's salvation by merit, which can be earned in a number of ways—for the Jew it was tied to the law or rules of Moses.
20. According to the wisdom of man, good people go to heaven, but according to the wisdom of God, bad people, who trust in Christ, go to heaven.
21. According to the wisdom of man, sin is something God overlooks, but according to the wisdom of God, sin is punished in Christ.
22. It's for these reasons, the wisdom of God is foolishness to man—it doesn't make sense to his fallen mind.
23. (2) The wisdom of God is irrefutable by man—by this I mean, although he may reject it, he can never disprove it.
24. Thus, this account of Stephen, has much to teach us about evangelism, debate, and interaction with those who oppose the truth.
25. (a) We have to trust the word—by this I mean, at the end of the day we have to trust the word of God.
26. The word of God is not dependent upon us—it doesn't need us to justify it, defend it, or authenticate it.
27. We've all heard the statement of Charles Spurgeon, who likened the word of God to a lion engaged.
28. CHS—"The Word of God is like a lion. You don't have to defend a lion. All you have to do is let the lion loose, and the lion will defend itself."
29. The word of God is self-authenticating—when the word comes home to a soul, accompanied with the power of the Holy Spirit, that soul will bow to the wisdom of God.
30. This should be a wonderful encouragement to every Christian—it's not ultimately about you or your wisdom.
31. It's foremostly about the perfection and power of God's word—it's perfect all by itself and it needs no help.
32. Thus, by "trusting the word" I mean, you also "trust the Spirit"—trust God to make His word effectual.
33. Martin Luther—"I opposed indulgences and all papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word: otherwise, I did nothing. And then, while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friend Philip, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing; the Word did it all."
34. (b) We have to know the word—this is kind of the other side of the coin; if Scripture is a sword, we need to learn how to use it.
35. This includes a knowledge of what the world believes, and an ability to use the truth to combat those errors.
36. Perhaps we can say, Stephen preached the wisdom of God wisely—He knew how to handle the word (2Tim.2:15 – 'study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed').
37. (3) The wisdom of God is liberating for man—by this I mean, within God's wisdom there's found salvation.
38. 1Cor.1:30—"But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption."