

“Stephen”
Acts 6:8 – 7:60
(Preached at Trinity, April 6, 2004)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. We now come to the lengthy section dealing with the Stephen's defense of the faith and ultimate martyrdom. This passage marks a transition in the Book of Acts.
 - A. To this point Peter has been the dominant figure who was raised up as the preacher to the Jews. Paul is about to be introduced as the Apostle to the Gentiles and from that point Peter begins to fade from the scene.
 - B. In a way, Stephen serves as an introduction to the ministry of Paul. Paul was present at the death of Stephen. It is quite possible that Stephen's message left a great impression upon Paul.
2. The man Stephen was already a man of distinction within the church. Being a man full of the Holy Ghost and of wisdom he was chosen to be one of the first deacons in the church.
 - A. These men were the first six but certainly not the last. This was to be a permanent office in the church. In Paul's letter to the Church of Philippi we find it addressed to the both the bishops and the deacons:
Philippians 1:1 – “Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:”
 - B. Since the membership of the church numbered over 10,000 the deacons would have been very busy with their duties and others besides these seven would have been ordained.
 - C. As I pointed out before, some of these first deacons may have occupied the office a short while before being ordained to another office.
 1. This will be seen in **Acts 21** where Philip is described as holding the office of evangelist.
Acts 21:8 – “And the next *day* we that were of Paul's company departed, and came unto Caesarea: and we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was *one* of the seven; and abode with him.”
 2. Tradition tells us that Prochorus later became Bishop of Nicomedia
 3. Calvin says in his commentary that Nicolas is probably to be identified sadly with the heretic mentioned in **Revelation 3**
Revelation 2:14-15 – “But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.
¹⁵ So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.”

“The ancient writers do, with great consent, affirm that this Nicholas, which was one of the seven, is the same whom John maketh mention in the Revelation, that he was an author of a filthy and wicked sect. For which cause we must not be negligent in choosing ministers of the church. For if the hypocrisy of men do deceive even those which are most vigilant and careful to take heed, what shall befall the careless and negligent.”

3. We are not told of a certainty that Stephen left the office of deacon. Normally the ministry of the Word is particular to the office of pastor. The deacons were chosen that the Apostles might devote their time to the ministry of the Word.
 - A. Stephen, however, was a man blessed with uncommon gifts.
 1. In **Verse 5** we are told that he was “full of faith and of the Holy Ghost” **Verse 8** records that Stephen was: “full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.”
 2. Stephen, being closely associated with the Apostles, was able to do many of the Apostolic miracles
2 Corinthians 12:12 – “Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.”
(the word for “signs” is the same word translated “miracles” in **Verse 8**)
 3. In the New Testament only the Apostles, Stephen, Philip, and Barnabas performed miracles. Stephen, Philip, and Barnabas were directly linked to the apostles.
 4. Although Stephen was a deacon which is not an office given to the ministry of the Word, Stephen was endowed with the ability to boldly expound the Word of God.
 - B. We are not told that he was called as a preacher of the Word, yet he boldly stood for the Gospel
 1. Matthew Henry: “And being faithful in a little, he was entrusted with more; and, though we do not find him propagating the gospel by preaching and baptizing, yet we find him here called out to very honourable services. It is not strange that Stephen, though he was not a preacher by office, did these great wonders.”
 2. Although Stephen was not called to preach by office, he boldly proclaimed the Word of God – Being closely associated with the Apostles his words carried great authority – in essence he preached the Word.
 - C. Paul would later describe the reward for deacons who serve the office well.
1 Timothy 3:13 – “For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”
4. Stephen indeed had “great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.” Manifesting great boldness, he may have even entered the synagogue to dispute with the Jews – **See Verse 9**
5. As we enter this passage I want to focus, first of all, on the initial reaction of Stephen’s persecutors to the Gospel message. Their reaction in the face of this godly man should be consistent with the world’s reaction to us.

- I. They disputed with Stephen – **Verse 9**
 They despised both the man and the message
- A. They hated Stephen because of what he was
1. The word for “arose” means to stand up or to raise up – it implies that they were stirred to action. They rose up against Stephen
 2. Jesus told His disciples that they could expect hatred by the world
1 John 3:13 – “Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.”
 3. Humanity is in a constant state of enmity with God – when we become one of His the hatred is then directed towards us
 4. We bear the image of God – they hate the image of God
 5. We should not be surprised at their reaction. Christians from the beginning have experienced it
 Paul described his own life
2 Timothy 3:11 – “Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of *them* all the Lord delivered me.”
- B. They hated the message of Stephen – the message of Christ.
1. The religious leaders had warned the Apostles,
Acts 4:18 – “And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.”
Acts 5:28 – “Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name?”
Acts 5:40 – “. . . and when they had called the apostles, and beaten *them*, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.
 2. It was Stephen’s mention of Jesus that threw them into a rage
Acts 7:56 – “And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.”
 3. The world doesn’t mind religion but when you set King Jesus before them they respond with vicious hatred
 This is why they despise the Law of God
- II. They could not overcome the truth of the Gospel – **Verse 10**
- A. The Jewish unbelievers debated with Stephen
1. Stephen spoke with wisdom and power – multitudes were being converted
 2. We’ve seen the same thing with Peter and John
 Peter spoke with a power not his own.
Acts 4:13 – “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled”
 3. They could not deny his words. Truth can be hated and misrepresented but it cannot be denied
- B. This is why we must hold forth God’s Words with boldness
1. Unbelievers reject God’s messengers but they cannot deny the power of their words when they speak the Word of God
 2. The world doesn’t hate worldly wisdom – but worldly wisdom will not help them. They need the Words of Christ

- C. We must always remember that we speak with power that is not our own
1. Stephen was full of faith and power
 - a. His faith was in God
 - b. His power came from God –
Acts 6:10 – “And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.”
 - c. This is consistent with the promise of Christ
Luke 21:15 – “For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist.”
 2. The man who marches forth in his own strength doesn’t realize his own helplessness – he will be smitten with failure and then fear
James 4:6-7 – “But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”
 3. The great people God has used are those who have come to the end of themselves and God imparts to them great power.
Matthew 19:26 – “But Jesus beheld *them*, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.”
 4. We boldly represent Christ the King – the omnipotent, sovereign ruler of the universe. We must represent Him with the power of Almighty God

III. They resorted to a false representation of Stephen – **Verses 11-14**

- A. All Stephen had done was speak the truth to them
1. They could not deny his words
 2. Paul’s words in Galatians
Galatians 4:16 – “Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?”
 3. Being unable to deny the words of Stephen they began to malign his character – they presented him as a dangerous man
 - a. They accused him of being a blasphemer
 - b. They accused him of abrogating the law – neither was true
Although in Christ the ceremonial law found its fulfillment
- B. The truth will always be blasphemy to those who hate it
Acts 6:13 – “And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:”
1. Few today want teachers to bring them the truth
2 Timothy 4:3 – “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;”
 2. All men naturally suppress the truth.
Romans 1:18 – “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;”
κατέχω - Compound word – “Hold Down” - to suppress, hold back
 3. The lost man finds it easy to continue in unbelief. He denies every warning about himself.

- IV. They could not deny the excellence of Stephen – **Verse 15**
- A. They were stirred about the excellence of Stephen
1. This could be referring to his appearance of serenity. He was confident before them because he represented Christ
 2. This could point to a supernatural brightness upon his countenance so that he had the brightness of an angel.
 3. Calvin points to his confidence. Whereas most condemned men show a pale countenance and stammer in their speech Stephen showed only confidence.
 3. I believe it also points to the excellence of his character – They were trying to accuse him of being evil. Instead he was holy, righteous.
 4. We must notice that Stephen had only done good in their presence
 - a. The signs and wonders probably included healing.
 - b. Notice his love even as he is being stoned
Acts 7:60 – “And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.”
 5. Stephen was being accused of crimes punishable by death, yet he has only been holy before them
- B. This must be the testimony of our life.
1. For 2000 years Christians have gone about doing good
 2. Instead of recognizing the miracle of our conversion they look upon us as being evil – a plague to be removed.
 3. We must always live in such a manner that although they hate us they cannot deny our righteous character.
1 Peter 2:12 – “Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by *your* good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.”
 4. May they look upon us as if they had seen an angel

Conclusion:

1. Such will be our position in the world
 - A. These lost men despised both the man and the message. The world will also despise us and the message we bring.
 - B. They could not overcome the truth of the Gospel – **Verse 10**
 1. Stephen spoke with wisdom and power
 2. His faith was in God
 His power came from God –
Acts 6:10 – “And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.”
 - III. They resorted to a false representation of Stephen – **Verses 11-14**
 - C. In the end they had to resort to false witnesses.
 They could not deny the excellence of Stephen – **Verse 15**
 They could not deny his righteous character
2. May God grant that we live righteously in the world as we seek to win them for Christ.