

**Text:** Acts 6:8-15, with review of 6:1-7

**Title:** Stephen Opposed by the Jews

**Truth:** True teaching is often misunderstood by unbelievers and twisted into something that it is not.

**Date/Location:** Wednesday 9/20/2023 (rev. from Sunday 6/3/2012) at FBC

## **Review 6:1-7**

- A. A problem arose in the church. Ideally, we want to be forward thinking enough to head off such problems before they become problems. “Foresee the evil” (Prov. 22:3, 27:12).
- B. The leadership suggested a wise solution which was adopted by the gathered believers. They had a nomination process of sorts and appointed men to handle the task. Seven men were appointed over the business. They probably were quite involved in doing the work, at least initially, but ultimately were overseers of it in the sense they did not carry out all the details. This became the foundation for the formalized office of deacon (1 Tim. 3:8-13).
- C. It is important for pastors to recognize issues that are overburdening them and keeping them from doing the key ministries of prayer and preaching of the Word, and then to hand off other ministries. Example: mowing grass. I serve in some ways to be an example and because I have the capability to do so, but I have to be careful about overdoing it since I have literally more important things to do. This does not mean serving tables is unimportant—it is, but its importance does not match the pastor’s gifts and responsibilities.
- D. When this is done, the Bible says, the Word of God spread. The church was functioning on all cylinders, as it were, with no load imbalance, and was able to see great growth, even among the Levitical priests. The total number of disciples multiplied. There were already over 5,000 disciples at 4:4. There were many thousands of believers at this time. This set the stage for the initial growth of the church throughout the world.

## **I. Character and Preaching of Stephen, v. 8**

- A. Stephen was full of faith and power. I believe the Biblical principle is that you must have faith to have power or experience power (Matt. 13:58). In Stephen’s case and at that time, he could do miraculous things—wonders and signs. We were told earlier in 6:5 that Stephen was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. One of the Godhead dwelt richly in Him. That can be the case for us too!

- B. Obviously Stephen was doing a little more than organizing the benevolence to Greek-speaking Jewish widows. He was using some time on the side to preach the gospel. This would put him in the line of fire of Jews who didn't want to hear about the new thing was happening.
- C. Perhaps there was an official debate or hearing in the synagogue of these "Freedmen."
- D. If chapter 7 is any indication, Stephen was fully informed of Jewish history from the Hebrew Bible and used that as a bridge to the new era, with a specific view toward rebuking and convicting sin.

## II. Opponents of Stephen, v. 9-10

- A. Evidently there were different types of synagogues. For those who spoke Hebrew/Aramaic, the mainline synagogue would work. For those who spoke Greek, another synagogue would be better.
- B. Evidently that was a sect of proselytes or Jews from the countries of Cyrene, Egypt, Cilicia, and Asia. It likely was a synagogue in which Greek was spoken; it could have been comprised (at least initially) of freed slaves. Perhaps it was a group of Hellenized Jews of the diaspora, as indicated by the different country names.
- C. There was a wide variety of people of various nationalities involved. These were Jews of the dispersion who had come back to Jerusalem. There were:
  - Cyrenians – from Cyrene, a city of Libya on the northeast Mediterranean coast. Acts 11:20 mentions men from Cyrene who were believers that shared the gospel with Greek-speaking Jews (see Acts 6:1).
  - Alexandrians – Egyptians from the Mediterranean coastal city.
  - Cilicians – where Paul was from (Acts 21:39), at the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea.
  - Asians – generally west and central modern-day Turkey. These are not "Asians" as we think of them today from China, etc.
- D. "Freedmen" was a category of person who had been enslaved or were children of former slaves, but now were not. This group would have a certain social standing different from slaves and different from those who had never been slaves. They were now free from their masters. These Jews may have been of families that were enslaved by the Romans when Jerusalem was conquered years earlier and had been set free along the way. They may not only have had a language difference, but also a

more general cultural difference in the sense of their societal status as free men.

- E. Their beliefs were somehow connected with Moses and God, the law, and the temple. The evidence shows that they really did not believe in God because they didn't think twice about lying and conspiring to get others to lie about Stephen. They did not love their neighbors as themselves (Lev. 19:18, Zech. 8:17). They seized Stephen though they did not have the authority to do so. They put up false witnesses against him. They were not really God-fearers, much less saved Jews, by any stretch of the imagination.
- F. They were unable to overcome Stephen in the debate because of the wisdom and Holy Spirit that he possessed.
- G. Comment about debates: they have limited value if they are done well. We have a few examples of debates or disputes in the NT (Paul in Athens, Acts 17; Stephen here in Acts 7). The proclamation of the message of the gospel is what God has arranged for us to do; sometimes that can occur in a setting like Stephen was in; but there is so much error mixed with truth that the truth density of a debate is not very high.
- H. Apparently the synagogue folks were concerned about losing their influence to the upstart sect in town which was growing quickly to influence thousands of people. Perhaps some of their own people were leaving the synagogue. But I have to wonder if they had anything better to do with their lives than stir up other people and lie and get people into trouble and get them killed.

### **III. The Accusation Against Stephen, v. 11-14**

- A. Did they really believe that Jesus was going to come and destroy the temple? This is reminiscent of the interaction between Jesus and some Jews in John 2:18-22 and brought up again at the trial of Jesus before the San Hedrin (Matt. 26:61, Mark 14:58) and then again when Jesus hung on the cross (Matt. 27:40, Mark 15:29). This had been a somewhat successful method of prosecution (persecution) against Jesus some months earlier. Consciously or not, they tried it again.
- B. The charges:
  - 1. Blasphemous words against Moses and God
  - 2. Blasphemous words against the temple and the law.
  - 3. Jesus of Nazareth with destroy the temple and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.

- C. The charge about Jesus destroying the temple is ridiculous. The charge is wrong, first, because Jesus originally told the Jews to destroy the temple, and he would raise it up in three days. They misunderstood him to say HE would destroy the temple, but in fact did not say that. Second, they misunderstood him because he was talking about the temple of his body, and not the second temple building. So, they bring this twice-corrupted charge against Stephen. And third, the council believes that Jesus is dead, and his body has been stolen away (at least that's their story!), so how could they be concerned now about Jesus coming back to destroy the temple? It does not make any sense: even if Stephen was saying it, it should be, in their view, the ravings of a madman.
- D. Their charge, about changing the customs, has some truth to it—but it was undoubtedly presented as a wholesale change with no regard for the continuity between the old covenant and the new, nor the reasons for the change. These freedmen offered nothing like the sophistication of the analysis in the book of Hebrews. Any change was a bad change in their view.
- E. The charges give us some idea of Stephen's preaching, misunderstood as it was. They charged him with speaking against four things, so he must have been speaking *about* those things:
1. Moses. Stephen taught about Jesus as one greater than Moses. To the Jew, no one was greater than Moses.
  2. God. Stephen's speaking against God may have come from his elevating Jesus as Messiah and Lord equal to the Father. To the Jew, God is strictly monotheistic.
  3. The temple. His speaking against the temple would be that he believed the temple ritual did not and could not provide salvation. There was one final sacrifice done by Jesus. But even Paul participated in rituals and sacrifices at the temple after the resurrection of Christ (Acts 21:26), so there must have been a proper way to think about the sacrifices that did not put one in violation of the work of Christ. That understanding has at least this major component: animal sacrifices never justified anyone, and the faithful Jew of the Old Testament era *knew it*.
  4. The Law. His speaking against the law may have been their interpretation of his speaking about the insufficiency of the Mosaic Law to save and how something else was needed. The Law pointed out sin; it did not justify and could never justify anyone.

- F. We will see Stephen's extensive message in chapter 7, and that will give us a further clue of the kind of teaching that got him into trouble.
- G. They could not deal with the wisdom Stephen had, nor with the Spirit of God who dwelt in Him (remember he was full of faith and the Spirit, 6:5). He was a tough debate opponent. When words would not work, the unbelievers turned to whatever they could to silence him. That too is a common technique, used even today.

### **Conclusion, v. 15**

Stephen does not seem to be scared or anxious. He did not worry about what he was going to say (Matthew 10:19-20, Mark 13:11). To the contrary, he was sort of "glowing." God gave some extraordinary appearance to Stephen so it would be even more evident that he was a messenger of God. In both gospel passages referenced, the outcome is those people would be delivered to death by their own *brothers*. As we know, that is what happened to Stephen, who became the first Christian martyr.

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