

Scripture Reading:

Acts 6: “5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, 6 whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. 7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. 8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.” 9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

"Our Enemies Do Not Play Fair"

Last week we saw how a dispute in the church, an old fashioned problem, led to the selection of seven Godly men, who had good reputations and were filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We learned that we should not be surprised to find problems in the Church and that we also should strive to have good reputations, and be filled with the Spirit and wisdom. Luke now presents some details about the ministry of Stephen who became the first Christian martyr.

Perhaps the first question that should come to mind this morning is just how did Stephen get himself in so much trouble?

- The text tells us that various Jews got upset when they could not resist or handle the arguments that Stephen put forth.

Now as one who loves a good argument, I could easily draw the application that no matter what our calling in the Church may be, we should take every opportunity to pick some fights and win some arguments for Jesus!

- However, I am not sure this would be faithful to the text!

So we are still left with the question of how Stephen ended up in these disputes and what they were all about? And I know many of you will not be surprised when I tell you that the commentaries were not much help here: They had a ton of material on the various groups that Luke mentioned and discussion about how many synagogues Luke is actually referring to, but little on how Stephen got himself in so much trouble.

- But, I think the text does give us a couple of pretty good pointers or hints:

What was the problem in the Church that Stephen was appointed to solve along with the other six men? That's right, the Hellenist or Greek groups in the Church were saying that their widows were not treated as well as the Hebrew widows. It is interesting that when the seven men are selected and installed that they all appear to come from the Hellenist side of the dispute. More importantly, these men would of necessity spent a great deal of time among the Greek quarters in the Church if they were to make sure their widows were well cared for.

I strongly believe that verse eight is referring primarily to just that work on Stephen's part:

“And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.”

Stephan was NOT called to be an Apostle or even an Elder in the church at Jerusalem... He was appointed to serve the needs of the Saints in the Church and I would like to propose that he got himself in BIG trouble by doing exactly what he had been commanded and ordained to do:

- Taking care of the widows who had a Hellenist background!

ALL of the Jews from the Synagogue of the Freedman [from Rome], the Cyrenians & Alexandrians from Africa and those from Cilicia [where Saul of Tarsus came from] and Asia, which we would think of as Turkey were considered Hellenists!

- Stephen's ministry to the widows and meeting the other needs of the Saints in the young Church would have put him in constant contact with these people.

In other words he did great signs and wonders among those people!

We have discussed how the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit in power has brought forth the new creation: A new creation where God's people meet each other's needs which stood in stark contrast to the pagan empires and cultures of that day... We are reading Augustine's City of God at our Sacramento men's study and we are all the way into Book Four and he is still recounting the horrors of life in Rome!

Rome indeed was neither peaceful nor great by Christian standards.

Here in Jerusalem, as Jesus often pointed out, even the Jews had drifted far from the Old Testament call for proper care of the poor and the weak, the orphans and the widows!

- At bottom, I think that Stephen was making the leaders of these synagogues look bad!

So to defend themselves, much as the religious leaders often did with Jesus, I am sure they were constantly confronting Stephan with questions about what he was doing & by what authority he was doing these things! As we will clearly see when Stephan gives his great defense before the Sanhedrin...

- Stephen knows exactly what he was supposed to be doing and WHY he was doing it!

This is where all of the disputes arose in my opinion. These leaders tried to put Stephen in his place and they had little success. Luke says, “they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.”

And this brings us to our lesson for today: **Our enemies do not play fair!**

We often kid about life not being fair and regularly remind our children about this fact of life, but when it come to the enemies of the faith we certainly see that they play to win at all costs!

- Such was certainly the case here with Stephen!
- Whatever the cause of the disputes, Stephen held his own & they could not win a fair debate about the truth.

As we studied a few weeks ago, we know that we cannot argue folks into the Kingdom and that hearts of stone cannot believe no matter how much evidence is piled up in front of them!

However, we are not to lose heart because right in the midst of this account Luke also tells us that “many priests were obedient to the faith” and in a few chapters we will come to the amazing conversion of Saul of Tarsus who witnessed the trial and execution of Stephan!

At the same time it should not surprise us that many of those who we witness to also do not play fair! These Hellenists did not go back to the Scriptures and say, gee look, Stephen is right Jesus is the Messiah! As he will shortly point out to the full Sanhedrin, they followed a long history of rebellion in Israel by stubbornly holding to their errors! So what do they do instead?

- **They lie and cheat!**

Not only are they willing to lie and cheat but they recruit others to help them... They induce others to falsely state that they “heard Stephan speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”

OK, time for a question for the kids to make sure we don’t miss the point here: IF Stephen has a good reputation and is full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, do you think he would say blasphemous things about God? It is obviously wrong on its face and yet this is what they do and we will see Stephan brought before a full trial to defend himself against these false charges...

- **And a mighty defense he will give, reminding us that we must be ready always to give an answer for the faith!**

We will also see as Stephan gives his defense that he does address these false charges...

- **That he spoke poorly about God, about Moses and the Law and about David and the Temple.**

But what I want us to focus on this week is how we must learn that we too will face similar attacks. Lord-willing it will not again lead to martyrdom in our lifetimes here in America, but it occurs just the same. Our enemies do not play fair and I want to take a few minutes in closing to consider some the examples which many of us will face today.

It is not unique to our age: Stephan and the early martyrs faced the Jews and Romans: Brothers & sisters in the Lord loving each other was referred to as incest and partaking of the Lord’s Table was called cannibalism.

- **Obviously not a fair description of what was taking place in the Church**

Calvin and Luther took great solace from these accounts as they confronted the errors of Rome where they were called heretics when they quoted the Bible and schismatics when it was they who were kicked out of the Church!

- **So where are we likely to face unfair attacks today?**

I would like to suggest three areas where the world cannot resist the logic and wisdom of the Christian world view and thus must often resort to the tried and true tactic of unfair attacks:

- **Politics**
- **Science**
- **And of course Sex**

We talk often about Jesus being the Lord of Lords and King of Kings and how this impacts the civil realm so I won’t spend much time here:

We just need to remember that it is similar to how they handled Stephan in our text this morning:

- **When we speak up about Christian truths we are called oppressive when in fact it was Jesus who brought real liberty!**

It is easy to show how people have flourished under Christendom and have been brutalized under the rule of man, from the pagan empires of Greece and Rome right down to the modern ‘supporters of the people’ like Hitler and Stalin. Since men cannot win the debate on the facts they turn to lies & cheating

A Christian who says we should take the Bible seriously when establishing civil rule, is charged with being no different than the Taliban!

President Clinton this very week implied that anyone who speaks out about the fact that secular government should not be providing for more and more of our care is secretly encouraging more people to blow up Federal buildings as was done in Oklahoma City.

They know these charges are not true, but they make them anyway! Just as the Jews in our text accuse Stephen of blasphemy when he suggests that they too need to revisit their heritage and what it means.

The Church of our day has at least put up some resistance in the political realm but they have almost completely left the field of battle when it comes to science and sex and this is certainly where we need more Stephens today!

Here at Church of the King we read together the account of God’s creation on a regular basis and we sing many Psalms and hymns that tell of God’s control over the world. We do so to remember, and to teach our children these great truths and to be prepared to defend them in the midst of our pagan culture of death.

They stand in stark contrast to the humanist view of science where the theory of evolution says that time & chance alone gave us all we know. Now it is pretty easy to win the debate about the dignity of man when one side says he is made in the image of the Triune God whose very nature proclaims the value of love, relationships, service and sacrifice and the other says man is really just slightly more advance rocks.

- That might seem harsh, but it is at bottom what both sides are really proclaiming to be true and thus we do not see many real honest debates!

Their side does not want to deal with God because they have suppressed the truth in unrighteousness and since they cannot win the debate on the facts, they too turn to name calling...

I did not have to go far to find some good examples... The first article that I pulled up was discussing whether a teacher’s program to teach evolution in the third grade was too strong...

Listen to just a few of the responses that were posted in the comments section:

“Evolution is a fact period *[so much for honest debate]*”

“We protect our children from parents who raise their offspring into cult ideas and racism *[if you don’t accept evolution as a fact, you are a racist!]*”

“If we allowed people to deny their children to be educated in geography because they believe the earth is flat, there would be some major repercussions. *[you will be called a flat-earther, it is one of their favorites!]*”

“If we never moved past trying to ‘prove’ a theory in science we’d all still be testing why rocks fall towards earth... but then again, maybe you have issues with the theory of gravity too.”
[interestingly real scientists still do ask why rocks fall!]

“You have to teach them while they are young enough not to become corrupted and as ignorant as any of their parents who would disagree with this education plan”

One commenter was willing to allow people to be religious, “but without the literal interpretation/stupidity that continues to consider evolution a debatable subject.” *[remember, you could be religious in the Roman Empire as long as you bowed to Caesar!]*

And the attacks went on and on without one bit of debate about questions that were raised about the meaning of life or the source of DNA...

“You can’t teach a scientific theory alongside a fairy tale *[creation]*”

“Some people don’t believe we put men on the moon either. Should we rip all the pages about manned spaceflight out of the history books?”

“If you want your children to put fairy tales ahead of reason and scientific theory, fine, put them in a private Christian school where they can be dumbed down.”

“Kids that go to pathetic school districts like this will continue to be sheep, just like their parents...” *[obviously he could not see who the real sheep were in this lengthy discussion!]*

“So please continue your creationist, anti-science BS. My kids will learn how the real world works”

And of course they had to throw another of their favorite attacks in for good measure:

“Hell why stop here. Let’s just go ahead and say that the holocaust didn’t happen either!”

In the midst of all this, there was one brave commentator who played the part of a modern Stephen: “That’s a whole lot of name calling – which always makes for intelligent communication – can anyone tell me where DNA came from?” That question was never debated, no less answered in this discussion because as was the case with the Jews in our text, ‘they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.’

The God who created all there is and whose revelation opened up to us all the wonders of modern science must be set aside if we are to have real ‘scientific discussions’

Just as we have seen in political actions where God is set aside, this type of science will lead to more and more horrific policies and practices and we must be ready to defend the truth, even if it means being called a lot of names and being accused of saying a LOT of things we did not say!

And finally, we come to sex!

Just as they have with politics and science, the humanists have removed God from the equation: We have moved from a repressive Puritanical view of human sexuality to an age of “free love” and whatever types of relationships we want to have!

And as has been the case with politics and science, dealing with sex without God has come at a great cost:

- **Over fifty million children have given their lives at the altar of abortion in America to protect today’s loose sexual practices.**
- **Venereal diseases are at epidemic levels among those who reject God’s standards and some like AIDS are potentially fatal.**
- **We have record divorces and record visits to counselors and psychologists trying to find some real purpose or meaning in our relationships!**

This should not surprise us because it was God who invented sex!

- **When you turn away from His truth & wisdom the consequences are sad and substantial!**

Sadly today, many would not think this is an appropriate discussion to have in church:

Discussing sex is just embarrassing and the poor parents then have to answer all the questions the younger children will ask on the way home!

Well organizations like Planned Parenthood are not afraid to talk about their views in schools or playgrounds and I think we all know that sexual subjects are not taboo in the movies or on TV.

- **So I would argue that the Church and the family dinner table are exactly where we should be having these discussions!**

We want our children to be properly grounded and to be ready to give an answer for the faith, even when it comes to the proper understanding of sex and what it means in life. Knowing that God created sex as a beautiful and special means of drawing a man and woman close together in their relationship and for providing children to fill the earth is very important, especially today.

Our children need to be good students of the warnings against the improper use of sex that are taught in the Book of Proverbs, but they must also see the glories of the sexual relationship in marriage taught in the Song of Solomon and some of Paul's Epistles! If we do not they will not be prepared to defend the faith against the assaults from the world in this area today nor will they enjoy the glorious relationship that God may have planned for them in marriage.

- **And of course, if we dare stand up to the world in this area, we need to be ready for the really nasty name-calling...**

Saying that we are prudish, puritanical and stuffy will be the kinder ones... I won't quote the many that could be found in mixed company but at bottom we are considered to be narrow minded and VERY hateful if we don't allow people to exercise whatever sexual practices seem right to them!

It is in this area that we see perhaps the closest example of what I have proposed got Stephen in big trouble. As we teach our children to be responsible in their behavior and we demonstrate the love of Jesus in the beauty of our marriage relationship, including the sexual union, it will stand in stark contrast to the practices of the world, just as Stephan's care for those poor widows did in his day.

Now there are many in the Church today who would argue that we should not focus on subjects like politics, science or sex:

- **We are here to preach the Gospel, they would proclaim!**

Well, Stephen was called to care for the widows and his faithful actions brought him into contact and conflict with those who rejected God's truth

- **Was Stephan NOT sharing the Gospel?**
- **Should we do any less?**

When the Bible declares that Jesus is Lord of Lords and King of Kings, are we to think that only applies in heaven or some other world?

When the world says Jesus has no place in the civil realm who will answer those charges if we do not?

- **Are we being faithful disciples if we remain silent?**

The Bible declares that Jesus is the creator and sustainer of all there is so when the so-called scientific community says it goes along just fine without Him, who will answer this nonsense if we do not?

- **Again are we being faithful disciples if we remain silent?**

Finally, the Bible declares that God is love and that the marriage relationship, which includes sex, is a demonstration of God's love for His people! When the world says that sex is just some exciting chemical reactions and really no big deal, just enjoy it for the moment, who will answer if we do not?

- **Are we being good disciples if we remain silent?**
- **Or worse yet, when we allow the practices of the world to impact our lives and marriages more than the Bible?**

As I have shown, engaging in any of these areas today will bring swift reactions from those who have rejected the God of the Bible: Complete with all the name-calling and false witnesses that Stephen faced. We will pray that our enemies will see and repent and come to faith as Luke tells us many priests were doing...

- **But it will not surprise us to see a very hostile reaction from the world as Stephen did in that day.**

Not a reaction because we are 'picking a fight' or being obnoxious, but a reaction from those with hardened hearts to the real life that they can see Jesus working out in our lives.

The Christian life is faith and obedience, it is knowledge and action. It is understanding and doing what God teaches us in His Word!

When we do this in the power of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of God's Word, even our enemies will look upon us as those who have the faces of angels...

- **Something these men saw in the face of Stephen as they brought him to trial.**

When you allow God to be fully present in your life, it is something that cannot be hidden and it will be seen by friends and enemies alike!

As Jesus instructed us in His sermon on the mount: "11 "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you... 14 You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.

16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

Communion Meditation: II Corinthians 4:6-10

"For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. 8 We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed-- 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body."