

GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SOLI ◇ DEO ◇ GLORIA

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

The Arrest of Stephen

Acts 6:8-15

May 13, 2007

- I. **God Works through His Messengers to Declare the Truth of the Gospel**
- II. **The World Hates the Truth of the Gospel**
- III. **God Vindicates His Messengers to His Glory**

I. **God Works through His Messengers to Declare His Truth**

- ❑ Luke begins this section, in **Verse 8**, by stating, ‘And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.’
 - As was the case with the Apostles, the signs and wonders performed by Stephen were intended, not to glorify Stephen, but to authenticate the Gospel message and the unique apostolic witness of the messenger – thus, ultimately, glorifying God.
- ❑ Yet, Luke uses an rather interesting phrase to describe Stephen: he was ‘full of grace and power.’
 - According to Campbell Morgan, this phrase means ‘sweetness and strength...merged in one personality.’ John Stott continues, ‘Certainly ‘grace’ seems to indicate a gracious, Christ-like character, while his power was seen in the great wonders and miraculous signs which he did among the people.’
- ❑ Clearly, the ‘grace and power’ with which Stephen performed the miracles was nothing short of the power of God working through him.
- ❑ Yet, the wonders and signs that Stephen performed among the people were not simply an end in themselves. For, as **Verse 10** indicates, Stephen was not simply performing miracles, but was speaking, declaring the truth of the Gospel message. Again, the miracles authenticated the spoken message. No doubt the spoken message was the truth of the Gospel!

II. The World Hates Truth

- However, despite the ‘grace and power’ with which Stephen performed signs and wonders among the people, Luke states that ‘some men from what as called the Synagogue of the Freeman, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.’

As John Calvin rightly states concerning this Verse, ‘It appears that the glory of the gospel was always joined with the cross and divers troubles.’

- While describing the Synagogue of the Freedmen, Luke lists four groups of people [the Cyrenians, Alexandrians, Cilicians and Asians]. *Some have suggested a fifth: the Freedmen; however, what is likely is that all of these groups were freed slaves from the respective areas.
 - ‘The synagogue was instituted, perhaps as early as the Babylonian exile [in the absence of a standing Temple], for the reading and exposition of the sacred scriptures. Especially in the lands of the dispersion, it served as the general community center for the Jews in any locality. In a large city there might be several Jewish synagogues, although the tradition that there were 480 in Jerusalem before its destruction [in A.D. 70] (I] *Megillah* 73d) may be taken with a grain of salt.’
F.F. Bruce
 - What Luke is describing here is most certainly one synagogue in Jerusalem consisting of multiple groups of freed slaves from different regions of the Diaspora.
 - These groups were, in fact, Hellenistic, foreign Jews, who had settled back in Jerusalem.
 - Some have even suggested, and it is certainly quite probable, that Saul of Tarsus [later, the Apostle Paul], was in this synagogue. The reason is because Saul was a native of Tarsus, the chief city in Cilicia.
- ❖ Notice the subtle irony here: the men arguing with Stephen were **free slaves** and their descendents – men and women who had been liberated from physical bondage; yet, before them stood Stephen who declared Jesus as the Christ...the long-awaited Messiah, the true, eternal Liberator. Yet, Jesus came, not to simply liberate men from physical bondage, but spiritual, sinful bondage. Tragically, these Freedmen, who had been liberated from physical bondage desired to remain imprisoned in their spiritual prison.

‘Therefore, those which were brought thither by the grace of God, and ought to have embraced Christ so much the more willingly, assault him first, and inflame the fury of others, as it were with a trumpet. Also Luke will in many other places afterward declare that the Jews, which were scattered abroad in the provinces, were most deadly enemies to sound doctrine: and most venomous in moving tumults.’
John Calvin

- As the Freedmen ‘rose up and argued with Stephen’ **Verse 8**, it was clear that they did not like what he had to say – in fact, they hated it, as will be clear shortly. However, according to Luke **Verse 9**, ‘But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.’
 - Notice, the Freedmen were **unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit** with which Stephen was speaking.
 - In other words, it was the Spirit within Stephen that the Freedmen could not argue with.
 - This was a fulfillment of the words of Jesus.

In **Luke 21:14-15**, Christ says, ‘So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute.’

Also, in **Luke 12:12**, Jesus Himself states, ‘When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.’

Finally, **John 15:26-27** states: ‘When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, and you will testify also, because you have been with Me from the beginning.’

- The Exalted Christ, who came into full possession Holy Spirit, sent Him to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel of Christ.

❖ **In other words, it is the Person of the Holy Spirit within Stephen who is ‘speaking’ words of wisdom and who testifies to the truth of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the Glory of God the Father.**

- No one is more wise, more intelligent than God. As the third Person of the Trinity, One who is fully God, the testimony of the Holy Spirit through Stephen silences the enemies of the cross.

In Acts **5:32**, Peter stated, ‘And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.’

Romans 3:19 states, ‘Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God.’

- Recall Peter and John before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:14: ‘And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they [the Sanhedrin] had nothing to say in reply.’

- Since the Freedmen could not refute Stephen publicly **Verse 10**, they resort to ‘secretly induce men’ [‘presumably by bribery’ according to John Stott] **Verse 11**.
 - The truth of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ **cannot be refuted** in the open. It is truth. The only way to refute the truth of the Gospel, as demonstrated here, is in secret, through lies and deception.
 - Also, it is fascinating how the Freedmen accuse Stephen as ‘speaking blasphemous words against Moses and against God.’
 - In this phrase, they speak the name of Moses in the same breath as that of God Himself. It was, in fact, the Freedmen who were guilty of such blasphemy, as they elevated Moses to a divine status never intended by God.
 - Such is the case, even today, among those who adhere to less than sound doctrine. In these situations, men are always elevated to an unscriptural status, and to challenge such men is to be accused of being as equally blasphemous [and often times **more blasphemous**] as a direct offense against God Himself.
 - **Moses was the law-Giver; however, Christ was the fulfillment of the Law,** and was the prophet greater than Moses. Tragically, the Jews, and the Freedmen in this case, were blind to this truth, thus condemning themselves.
 - Lastly, when the Freedmen accused Stephen of blasphemy against God, it is quite possible that the basis of such an accusation was that Stephen had uttered the ineffable name of God: YHWH. According to later rabbinical law, no one, except the high priest on the Day of Atonement, could utter the name of YHWH. Such an utterance was ruled as blasphemy and punishable by death. As the Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 7.5, states, ‘The blasphemer is not guilty until he has expressly uttered the Name [that is, YHWH].’

- After they gathered false witnesses **Verse 11** [NOTE the parallel between Stephen’s trial and Christ’s], the Freedmen **Verse 12**, ‘stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council.’
- Then, **Verse 13**, ‘They put forward false witnesses who said, ‘This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law;’
 - The Freedmen accused Stephen of attacking the most sacred aspects of Judaism: the holy place and the Law.
 - The ‘holy place’ was the sanctuary of the Temple, the location of God’s presence, His glory.

- The ‘Law’ was the ‘Holy Scriptures’, the precepts of God, His revelation of Himself.
- However, the tragedy of the Jews is that they looked to the Temple and to the Law as ‘ends’ in themselves. Yet, each of these was a sign, pointing to something, or, more properly, Someone, more sacred: the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.
 - This is why Jesus said, in Matthew 12:6, ‘But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here.’
 - In John 2:19-21, after cleansing the Temple, Jesus cried out, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ Then, John writes, ‘The Jews then said, ‘I took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?’ John continued, ‘But He [Jesus] was speaking of the temple of His body.’
 - In Mark 14:58, some false witnesses at the trials of Christ said, ‘We heard Him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands.’”
 - Also, in Matthew 5:17, ‘Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.’
 - The tragic point is self-evident: the Jews held to the symbols, the signs of Christ as the ‘sacred ends’ rather than seeing them fulfilled in the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the essence of idolatry. We worship the symbol or the sign that points to God, that reflects His glory, rather than the One to whom the sign points. We, as the Apostle Paul states in Romans 1, ‘worship the created things rather than the creator’ – the One to whom Creation points.

John Calvin wrote: ‘Nevertheless, it may be gathered out of their [the Freedmen’s] accusations, that Stephen did, in the abrogating of the law, set the body against the shadows, and the substance against the figure; for if ceremonies be abolished by Christ, their truth is spiritual. The Jews, which would have them continue forever, did consider nothing in them but that which was gross, carnal, earthly, and which might be seen with the eyes. Briefly, if the use of ceremonies were continual, they should be frail and should vanish away, because they should have nothing by the only external show, so that they should have no soundness. Therefore, this is their true perpetuity, when as they are abrogated by the coming of Christ; because it followeth hereupon that the force and effect thereof doth consist in Christ.

Calvin continues, ‘The principal precepts of the law did indeed concern spiritual worship of God, faith, justice, and judgment; but because these men make more account of the external rites, they call the rites which are commanded concerning the sacrifices, ordinances of Moses, by excellencies.’

- We are often guilty of this today, as we hold to physical, earthly objects as sacred, when, in actuality, only God is.

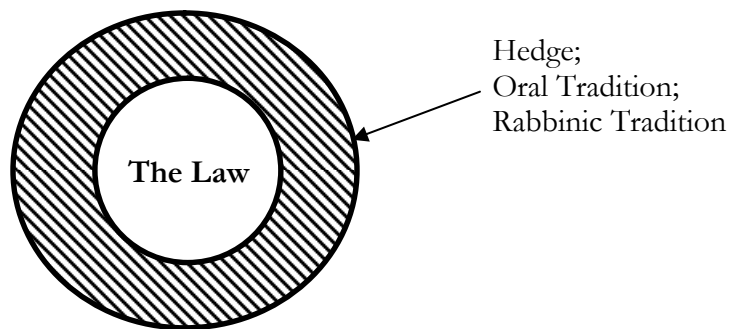
- Even references to earthly ‘things’ such as church buildings as ‘God’s house’ defy the Scriptural mandate to worship God in Spirit and in truth [John 4:24].
 - This was the purpose of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, in John 4:24: ‘Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.’ John 4:21-24
 - In other words, true worship is Spiritual. It cannot be seen by the human eye. Further, true worship is spirit-ward – it is directed towards God, who is, Himself, Spirit.
- This is true, even with the Scriptures. The physical Scriptures themselves are not what is sacred; rather, it is the essence of the Scriptures – the perfect, inerrant, revelation of God which is sacred.
 - When speaking to the Pharisees, in John 5:39, Jesus said, ‘You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me.’
 - In other words, the Pharisees were so legalistic, that they believed the **physical Scriptures** themselves contained eternal life.
 - The Mishnah (the body of Jewish tradition) states, “The more study of the Law, the more life...If a man has gained a good name he has gained [somewhat] for himself; [however], if he has gained for himself words of the Law he has gained for himself life in the world to come.” *Pirke Aboth 2:7*
 - In the early centuries of our era this reverence for the letter of Scripture was taken to extreme lengths. Sir Frederic Kenyon says that scribes “numbered the verses, words, and letters of every book. They calculated the middle word and the middle letter of each. They enumerated verses which contained all the letters of the alphabet, or a certain number of them” *from Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscript*
 - Further, when copying out the Scriptures the scribe was not to write more than one letter before looking at his original again. (Meg. 18b)
 - Leon Morris writes, “But they [the Jews] read them [the Scriptures] with a wooden and superstitious reverence for the letter, and they penetrated to the great truths which they pointed.”

- ❖ This is why we must never forget that it is not the symbol that is sacred, but the One to whom the symbol points. The Scriptures, the Written Word, reveal Christ, the Living Word, who reveals the Father. The physical temple points to Christ, the Living Temple. The law is fulfilled in Christ, as Christ is the perfect representation of the Father.

R.C. Sproul, in a lecture on the doctrine of Hell, stated:

We have to ask ourselves, ‘What is the function of a symbol? The function of figurative, metaphorical language in Scripture is to demonstrate likeness to a reality...A Symbol is not the reality itself...the symbol points beyond itself to something else. Now, the question always is, ‘Does the ‘something else’ or the reality toward which the symbol points, is that reality less intense, or more intense than the symbol. And the assumption is that there is always more to the reality than what is pointed to by the symbol.’”

- ❑ The Freedmen concluded their attack of Stephen by saying, ‘...for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.’
 - Notice, first of all, that they refer to Jesus, in the derogatory manner, **this Nazarene**.
 - But, again, without understanding the purpose and essence of the Temple, the Freedmen had no idea what Christ meant when He said, ‘Destroy this Temple...’
 - Further, Christ never attacked or altered the true customs which Moses handed down to the Jewish people; rather, Christ attacked the man-made, man-created ‘hedge’ that the Jews had built around the law.
 - They were legalistic in the development and adherence to Rabbinical (extra-biblical) law



- Example of the Law vs. the Rabbinical Tradition
 - Law: Remember the Sabbath and Keep it Holy.
 - Rabbinical Tradition: Is it lawful to eat an egg laid on the Sabbath?

- Jesus perfectly kept, perfectly fulfilled the Law of God; however, He attacked, indeed, destroyed *their* Law: the sinful, man-made rabbinical law of the Jews.
- ‘What He [Jesus] did was to contradict the scribal misrepresentations of Moses, and so seep away all the traditions of the elders.’
John Stott

- Lastly, John Stott rightfully says, ‘Thus the opposition [to Stephen, and ultimately to Christ] degenerated from theology through slander to violence. The same order of events has often been repeated. At first there is serious theological debate. When this fails, people start a personal campaign of lies. Finally, they resort to legal or quasi-legal action in an attempt to rid themselves of their adversary by force. Let others use these weapons against us; may we be delivered from resorting to them ourselves!’
- Another precept demonstrated here is that ideas do, in fact, have consequences. Adherence to sound doctrine will always lead to a Godly, fruitful life. Likewise, adherence to false doctrine will inevitably have the opposite effect, regardless of how ‘good’ one may appear. This is why doctrine matters!

III. God Vindicates His Messengers to His Glory
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- Finally, Luke writes, in **Verse 15**, ‘And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.’
- The face of Stephen before the Sanhedrin brings to mind the face of Moses after he descended from Mt. Sinai with the Law (Exodus 34:29-35), as well as the face of Christ Himself on the Mt. of Transfiguration (Luke 9:29).
- Stott asks the profound question, ‘Was it not 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?’
- Yet, ultimately, what this scene demonstrates is that God Himself vindicates His servant for His glory.
- The purpose of the radiance of Stephen was not, ultimately to glorify Stephen, any more than the priesthood was intended to glorify Aaron. Rather, as Christ’s messenger, Stephen reflects the glory of God before his accusers in order to, once again, authenticate the truth of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, which ultimately gives glory to God the Father!