

Stephen

Acts 6:8-8:1 NIV

An ancient inscription on the Cathedral in Lubeck, Germany, says:

“Ye call me master, and obey me not. Ye call me Light and seek me not. Ye call me Way and walk me not. Ye call me Wise and follow me not. Ye call me Fair and love me not. Ye call me Rich and ask me not. Ye call me Eternal and seek me not. Ye call me Gracious and trust me not. Ye call me Noble and serve me not. Ye call me Mighty and honor me not. Ye call me Just and fear me not. If I condemn you, blame me not.”

This poem illustrates the antithesis of what Luke has written about the apostles. From the opening chapter in Acts, they were obedient to wait in Jerusalem as Jesus asked them to do. They spent their time in prayer, waiting for what God had promised.

And when the day of Pentecost came, they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and became witnesses in Jerusalem. Ignoring the threats of the Sanhedrin, and overcoming the tricks and traps of the powers of darkness, the apostles spoke with boldness, performed signs and wonders, and preached the word about Jesus.

By the time we get to the middle of chapter 5, Luke writes that: **“Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all were healed.” (Acts 5:16)**

The Word was beginning to spread beyond Jerusalem. Beginning with chapter 6, Luke’s narrative shifts from the Aramaic speaking community to the Greek speaking community with the Seven chosen to assist in the distribution of food.

Luke records that two of the Seven, Stephen and Philip, perform signs and wonders. The first we read about is Stephen.

Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen,¹⁰ but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. (Acts 6:8-10)

Of the Seven listed in verse 5, Stephen is listed first, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. I want to also remind you that all seven were highly qualified. They were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. To further identify and qualify these men, the apostles lay hands on them and pray. These men then ministered on behalf of the apostles in the Greek speaking communities.

Two of the Seven, Stephen and Philip, will greatly contribute to the advance of the

gospel through evangelism. Nothing is known of the other five, except included in a general statement as a result of the persecution in chapter 8 verse 4: **“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”**

Reading from verse 5 where Luke describes Stephen as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, to verse 8, a man full of God’s grace and power, doing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people is quite a leap from waiting tables. How did this happen? We don’t know. Luke does not directly link Stephen’s ministry as a deacon to his ministry as a preacher of the gospel.

What we are told is that Stephen ticked some people off.

Up to this point, the apostles had dealt with the high priest and his family, and members of the Sanhedrin, mostly Sadducees, who had taken a wait and see attitude at the advice of Gamaliel. But the rulers and elders of the synagogues were mostly Pharisees: a new group of opposition – Greek speaking Jews.

This synagogue of Freedmen, or Libertines, depending on your translation, whether made up of one synagogue or several in and around Jerusalem, began to actively oppose Stephen’s work. They began to argue, dispute; to question: but they were not able to answer his arguments.

Stephen was working in the community trying to help people. He was living in obedience to Jesus and was sharing the good news of God's forgiveness with everyone he could. And he was falsely accused, just like Jesus was.

Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God."

¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (Acts 6:11-15)

There is a lot we would like to know in these last few verses of chapter 6 that Luke does not tell us. For example, where are the apostles when this opposition surfaces? It is possible that the apostles had all they could handle with the Hebraic speaking Jews in and around the temple, and the Seven ministered mostly in the synagogues, which may have taken them a fair distance from the temple.

Something else we are not told, that would be interesting to know: what was

content of Stephen's preaching. We are simply told that Stephen was performing signs and wonders. Nothing is said about the content of his preaching.

At first, the opposition was willing to debate with Stephen. But when that didn't work, drastic measures were taken. What exactly ticked these elders and leaders of the synagogue off?

Stephen may have been teaching and preaching the same message as the apostles that brought about this opposition. Or, it could have been something peculiar to the Hellenistic community that Stephen rubbed the wrong way. There was a reason that there was a plurality of synagogues: much of the same reason why we have a plurality of churches. There was a reason that the Hebraic and the Greek worshiped in different buildings.

Whatever it was, it was enough to engage false witnesses and get the Sanhedrin involved, probably hoping for an official charge of blasphemy and a death sentence.

When words prove ineffective and arguments fail, desperate men, and women, turn to more desperate measures.

In 1 Kings 21, a man named Naboth had a vineyard that King Ahab wanted. But Naboth didn't want to sell or trade his vineyard. Ahab went home upset. This is when Jezebel got involved.

So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to

the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him. ⁹ In those letters she wrote:

"Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. ¹⁰ But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them testify that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death."

¹¹ So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them. (1 Kings 21:8-11)

Ahab took possession of Naboth's vineyard after he was killed, but it cost Ahab dearly. But, that's a story for another time.

At Stephen's trial, false testimony was given by those who accused Stephen of continually speaking against the holy place, against the law, against the customs of Moses, and that Jesus would destroy the temple.

As is often the case, there was a measure of truth in this accusation. The temple and Jerusalem would be destroyed:

1 Now as Jesus was going out of the temple courts and walking away, his disciples came to show him the temple buildings. 2 And he said to them, "Do you see all these things? I tell you the truth, not one stone will be left on another. All will be torn down!" (Matthew 24:1-2)

But Jesus never said that he was going to do it.

The New Covenant would change some of the things in the Old Covenant, but it would fulfill them, not destroy them. Mostly what would change were not actually the teachings of Moses, but rather the traditions of the Jews.

I found this story that illustrates how traditions can get started.

A very poor holy man lived in a remote part of China. Every day before his time of meditation in order to show his devotion, he put a dish of butter up on the window sill as an offering to God, since food was so scarce. One day his cat came in and ate the butter. To remedy this, he began tying the cat to the bedpost each day before the quiet time. This man was so revered for his piety that others joined him as disciples and worshiped as he did. Generations later, long after the religious man was dead, his followers placed an offering of butter on the window sill during their time of prayer and meditation. Furthermore, each one bought a cat and tied it to the bedpost.

Verse 15 is another place that we would like more information. What do we do with verse 15?

¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

What does the face of an angel look like? And how would these men know what the face of an angel looked like?

Some suggest that this language is figurative; indicating Stephen composure even when under fire of false accusations.

Some suggest that Stephen's face took on a glow, similar to Moses' face after he had been in the presence of God.

Luke had to get his information from someone, because he wasn't there. Was that someone Paul; that is Saul of Tarsus? He was probably in this meeting. We know Saul was there at Stephen's stoning. You have to decide how to take verse 15.

Chapter seven begins with the high priest asking Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

Some ask why such a lengthy defense? The answer to that question depends on how you answer this question: was Stephen defending himself or the message he preached?

He could have simply said that the charges were not true, but instead, beginning with Abraham, he grabs the attention of his listeners with a brief history lesson.

From the covenant of circumcision given to Abraham, Stephen moves to the patriarchs' jealousy of Joseph, who sold him into slavery. But God was with Joseph and rescued him from his troubles as well as saving Joseph's father, brothers and families from a famine.

Stephen then turns to Moses and reminds his listeners how their forefathers rejected

Moses' leadership on several occasions. It was Moses who said that God would send them a prophet like himself from their own people. But they rejected Moses and turned their hearts back to Egypt and worshiped what their hands had made.

Stephen reminds his listeners that their forefathers had the tabernacle of testimony with them in the desert, and yet worshiped idols that they had made with their own hands. He reminds them that the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands.

And then with these words identifies his listeners with their forefathers:

"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was their ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." (Acts 7:51-53)

Stiff-necked and uncircumcised was a stinging rebuke used by past prophets describing Israel's refusal to acknowledge and submit to the laws of Moses. Many of these men who were listening to Stephen would have been present during Jesus trial.

When talking to his disciples about the end times, how nation will rise against nation, Jesus said this:

¹² “But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name.
¹³ This will result in your being witnesses to them. ¹⁴ But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. ¹⁵ For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.

Stephen became the first of many to fulfill these words of Jesus. With the stoning of Stephen a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. (Acts 8:1)

When given the opportunity, Stephen would not back down from the powerful Sanhedrin. Though Luke doesn't tell us specifically the content of Stephen's sermons; that is what upset the elders and leaders of the synagogues, one thing we know that was consistent with the apostles preaching: the Sanhedrin was guilty of their Messiah's murder.

(opening poem) This poem describes how a person can honor God with lip service, but their heart can be far from him. If you call him Master, then obedience must follow. If you call him Light, then you must seek him. If you call him the Way, then you must walk in his way.