

Acts 6-7: Stephen

14th March 2021

Dear KCF,

I would like to look at the character of Stephen this morning. He is such a godly and faithful man, who had a great impact on those around him. Although he faced false accusations, terrible injustice and brutal execution, God equipped him with gifts to deal with this trial.

Stephen

We first learn about Stephen when the 12 apostles were dealing with a complaint of the Greek-speaking believers against the Hebrew-speaking believers in Jerusalem. The Greek widows, who had no means to support themselves to buy food, were being “neglected in the daily distribution” and were going hungry. Rather than being distracted from their calling as apostles to preach the word of God, they wisely delegated this task to 7 men – Stephen being one of them. (Acts 6:1-6)

You would perhaps think that distributing food to widows could be done by virtually anyone. However, the apostles sought men with certain qualifications. Firstly, they should be men of “good repute”. They should also be men “full of the Spirit and wisdom”.

Why are these characteristics necessary for this practical duty? These qualities were required because the apostles saw that practical work of this kind is an inseparable function of the spiritual body of Christ: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (James 1v27). In this context, a good reputation would help maintain their integrity when dealing with single women who depended on their help. Being full of the Spirit and wisdom would help negotiate the complex cultural and pastoral issues which would have surrounded this work.

Stephen possessed even greater gifts than these. Not only was he of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom, he also was “full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (v5), “full of grace and power” performing “great wonders and signs among the people” (v8).

Clearly, such a man attracted some attention – but not the kind of attention we like. We are told some people “rose up and disputed with Stephen” accusing him of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and God” (v11) and speaking “words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us” (v11-14). These are serious charges!

These were false accusation set up by false witnesses. They were theological accusations, which concerned some of the most important aspects of the Jewish world-view amongst some at that time. This was a dispute about what is true about God, who He speaks through and where He does His work. However, since “they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (v10), Stephen was brought before the Jewish Council and the high priest to see if they could answer Stephen.

This was a dispute that could only be settled by the Word of God, and not by philosophy or rational speculation. Therefore, Stephen responds by presenting a summary of the biblical teaching about those things he was accused of speaking against: i) the Land of the Jews, ii) the Law of God and iii) the Temple – things that were of supreme importance to many Jews.

(I would recommend you read through Acts 7v1- 53 at this point!)

Here is my summary of Stephen's summary:

The Land (v2-36)

The popular piety of the day regarded the borders of Judah as the borders of God's activity in the world. In response, Stephen demonstrates that, no matter how holy the Holy Land is, God is not limited to that one place. He shows that God revealed himself outside of the Holy Land. For example, He revealed himself to Abraham in Mesopotamia, not Judah; he met with Joseph in Egypt, not Judah; and God met with Moses in Egypt (v17), Midian (v29), Sinai (v30), the Red Sea, and the Wilderness for 40 years, etc. The Hebrew scriptures prove that God works outside of the borders of the Holy Land in unholy places, contrary to what Stephen's accusers supposed.

The Law (v37-43)

Again, the popular piety of the day venerated and idealised the Law of God. So, to be accused of speaking in blasphemous terms about the Law and Moses (through whom the Law was delivered to God's people) was a very serious charge (6v11). To attack Moses is to attack God's Law. In response, Stephen quotes Moses himself, who claimed "God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers." So, rather than being rigidly fixed on Moses, the Jews should be looking to Jesus and listening to him. He came not to proclaim the Law but to fulfil the Law perfectly, for our salvation.

Stephen points out that in the time of Moses the Jews "refused to obey him but thrust him aside" despite his God-given prophetic role. In the same way, they have refused to obey the prophet Jesus and have thrust him aside. When they turned away from Moses, God turned away from his people. Stephen is warning that God will turn away from them if they turn away from Jesus.

The Temple (v44-50)

Finally, the popular piety of the day saw the Temple as the focal point of the work of God, immovable and permanent. In contrast, Stephen contrasts the immovable Temple with the mobile Tabernacle, which was not tied to any one place but moved as God led his people from place to place. Crucially, Stephen points out that the building of the Temple was a concession to David and Solomon (see 2 Sam. 7v5-16), and not something that limits God. God does not live inside houses made by man, and his work is not bound by them.

The reaction

As we know, Stephen's response outraged his hearers – even though it was all biblically faithful and true. His death by stoning occurred soon afterwards. This is a tragedy on two levels: that Stephen was taken away from the church, and that his accusers failed to see the good news of biblical truth due to their theological traditions.

It may be hard for us to appreciate the significance of these theological disputes and Stephen's response, as they were addressed to Jews steeped in the history of these things. However, what the Bible says about these things (the land, the law and the temple) are not merely theological puzzles that occupy bored theologians. A proper understanding of them helps us to understand the good news of the Gospel message. On the other hand, an incorrect understanding of them will hinder the apprehension of the Gospel. Stephen's teaching is good news for both Jews and Gentiles, and for us. Because he saw this significance he was prepared to die for its defence. Since he paid the ultimate

price for his own understanding, we should take the time to make sure we understand what he understood.

Application

Finally, I would like to draw some lessons and applications for us from this brief study of Stephen.

1. Possessing a good reputation, being full of the Spirit and wisdom, grace, power and faith will not protect us from trials of many kinds. However, these gifts will equip us with divine resources to deal faithfully with whatever comes our way – to the glory of God. That being so, let us pray that God will give us more of these things in increasing measure.
2. The Bible is full of glorious truth, which is good news for those who believe it and obey it. Bible studies are not hindrances to spiritual growth but are like fertilizer which promotes greater growth and maturity as we gain better insight and understanding of God and His ways.
3. Knowing the truth is a prerequisite for defending the truth and bearing witness to it. We do not need to know everything; we do not necessarily need the depth of understanding that Stephen possessed. But we do need to know and understand the most important things and hold fast to them.
4. Being right about what is true does not always persuade those who are wrong. Our task is to be faithful witness to the truth of God, come what may. Only God can open the eyes of those who cannot see the truth.
5. When we encounter dispute and opposition, our manner and demeanour should be full of grace and love, as well as truth. If there is any offence, it should be the offence caused by the truth of Jesus not by the way we respond.
6. Not all of us will die as martyrs, as a direct result and consequence of our faithful witness. But all of us are called to be faithful witnesses when the opportunity arises.
7. Someday, we are going to meet with Stephen. Then, we will see “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God”, as he saw.

May God bless you with a good reputation, faith, wisdom, grace and power. And may he continually fill you with His Holy Spirit! May he give you the courage to bear witness to the good truth of the Bible, making the most of every opportunity that comes our way.