

Acts 6:8-8:1, No. 16**“Stephen”****December 6, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We have an unusually long text to read this morning, but it is very clearly a distinct section of Luke’s narrative, what scholars call a *pericope*. As we read it put these two questions to yourself: why did Luke think it important to tell this story with so much detail? It is the account of the trial and execution of the first post-Pentecost Christian martyr, but why the long speech, by far the longest in Acts? Peter’s Pentecost sermon, for example, which we might have thought more important, is summarized in many fewer verses. And what was Stephen after in his speech? What was he trying to prove? How was his speech his own defense? (By the way, in English we spell Stephen with both a “v” and a “ph.” In Greek the letter is φ (phi), our “ph.”)

Text Comment

- v.9 Paul was from Cilicia. Was this the synagogue he attended and might he have been the chief instigator of the opposition to Stephen and the Christians, as 8:1 might suggest? In any case, we have some understanding today, don’t we, of how particular sanctuaries can become hotbeds of ideological fervor?
- v.11 As so often today, when arguments fail, a smear campaign will do as well or even better.
- v.12 Again, this progression – from theology, to slander, to violence – is being repeated in our own day, more evidence of the Bible’s realism. [Stott, 127]
- v.14 Jesus did, of course, say such things and Stephen was no doubt repeating his words, but the religious leadership had badly and willfully misunderstood his meaning. They were, as the Gospels make clear, deeply alienated from the true, and we would say obvious meaning of the Law of Moses, having overlaid it with thick layers of their own traditions of interpretation and practice. The Sanhedrin welcomed such charges against Stephen because they knew that if pious Jews heard that the Christians were convicted of blasphemy and of criticizing the Temple, they would be discredited.
- v.15 Whatever this description means, obviously Stephen’s appearance made a tremendous impression on everyone. It has been suggested by some that this was, in fact, divine glory radiating from Stephen’s face, as it had from Moses’ face ages before. If so, the Lord would have been confirming that Stephen had his approval. Paul, remember, who was at this time deeply antagonistic, would have been Luke’s primary source of information regarding this meeting. So he must, at the time, have himself been impressed with Stephen’s appearance.
- 8:2 The first section of Stephen’s speech extends from v. 2 to v. 8 and covers in the barest sketch the history of Abraham.

- v.9 The second section of Stephen's speech extends from v. 9 to v. 19 and covers Joseph and his exile in Egypt.
- v.16 V. 16 raises a problem. According to Gen. 49, Jacob was buried at Hebron, not at Shechem, in the burial cave Abraham had purchased from Ephron the Hittite (Gen. 23). Joseph was buried in Shechem in the plot purchased by Jacob from the sons of Hamor (Gen. 33:19; Josh. 24:32). The most likely explanation is that Luke, following a then common literary custom, telescoped or compressed two different events for the purpose of making a single point. [cf. Bock, 288-289; Peterson, 273] There are other examples of this phenomenon in Stephen's speech. Stephen also telescoped the two calls of God to Abraham in v. 2 and two biblical citations in v. 7. [Bruce, *Acts: Greek Text Com.*, 166]
- v.17 The third section of the speech runs from v. 20 to v. 43, and in this section we have the account of Moses' mistreatment by his own brethren. This is the longest part of Stephen's defense, no doubt because the accusation he was defending himself against was that he had spoken against the Law of Moses.
- v.44 The fourth section extends from v. 44 to v. 50 and recounts the period of Israel's history when the tabernacle was the sanctuary. It ends with scriptural citations that, as it were, put the temple in its proper place.
- v.51 The conclusion of Stephen's speech is found in vv. 51-53 and the gist is perfectly clear: just as Israel had so long and so often been a spiritually rebellious people, she continued to be so today. Indeed, in her rejection and murder of Jesus Christ, she had consummated her rebellion against God. These were biblically literate men and would know that both Moses and the prophets had used both epithets – “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised in heart” – to describe Israel's intransigent spirit of rebellion.
- v.55 We expect that Stephen would see Jesus *sitting* at the Right Hand, which is the way his position is usually described in the New Testament, *not standing*. Perhaps we are to visualize Jesus rising to welcome his first martyr! Stephen had been confessing Christ before men, and now Christ stood to confess him before the Father as he had promised to do. [Bruce, *NICNT*, 168-169]
- v.58 This was a detail of the episode that Paul never forgot, and which he repeats to his shame in Acts 22:20.
- v.60 Stephen's two remarks, of course, are very similar to two of the Lord's sayings from the cross.

Luke's description of Stephen's dying is “an unexpectedly beautiful and peaceful description of [a very brutal] death.” [Bruce, *NICNT*, 172] I've been reading a new short biography of Amy Carmichael by Iain Murray. And just after I noticed this gentle description of the death of Stephen, I came across this account of the death of one of Amy's orphaned girls. Lulla had suddenly come down with one of the tropical illnesses that swept so many away in those days. In a few days she was in great pain and

struggling to breathe and, Amy writes, “looking to us for something we could not give.” Amy left her bedside to pray that she would be taken quickly.

“I was not more than a minute away, but when I returned she was radiant. Her little lovely face was lighted up with amazement and happiness. She was looking up and clapping her hands as delighted children do. When she saw me she stretched out her arms, and flung them round my neck, as though saying good-bye, in a hurry to be gone; then she turned to the others in the same eager way, and then again, holding out her arms to Someone whom we could not see, she clapped her hands. Had only one of us seen this thing, we might have doubted. But we all three saw it. There was no trace of pain in her face. She was never to taste of pain again. We looked where she was looking, almost thinking that we would see what she saw. What must the fountain of joy be if the spray from the edge of the pool can be like that?” [65-66]

- 8:1 This sentence obviously is the conclusion of the section and belongs in our chapter 7. Except for the one reading Acts for the very first time and otherwise ignorant of early Christian history, the mention of Saul changes *everything*. Even the first time reader must wonder who this man is and why he was mentioned.

In George Bernard Shaw’s play *Androcles and the Lion* (1928) – you younger folk may know Shaw as the playwright who wrote *Pygmalion*, the play later turned into the musical *My Fair Lady* – Shaw summarizes the contents of Acts 7 in this way.

“A quite intolerable young speaker named Stephen delivered an oration to the council, in which he first inflicted on them a tedious sketch of the history of Israel, with which they were presumably as well acquainted as he, and then reviled them in the most insulting terms as ‘stiff-necked’ and ‘uncircumcised.’ Finally, after boring and annoying them to the utmost bearable extremity, he looked up and declared that he saw the heavens open, and Christ standing at the Right Hand of God. This was too much: they threw him out of the city and stoned him to death. It was a severe way of suppressing a tactless and conceited bore, but it was pardonable and human in comparison to the slaughter of poor Ananias and Sapphira.” [Cited in Bruce, *NICNT*, 164n]

Now that account of what we have just read is false on its face. The Sanhedrin obviously didn’t think Stephen’s account was boring; it was, in fact, deeply offensive when once they understood what conclusion he was drawing from the history he was recounting. They were so enraged, in fact, that they immediately dragged him out and executed him on the spot, even though that act posed some real danger to themselves given the limits of their authority under Roman rule. Nevertheless, that is how this episode struck a 20th century unbelieving Englishman. He thought of it in entirely conventional terms: boredom, rudeness, and an understandable overreaction on the part of the authorities. He, of course, could hardly comprehend what was actually happening here, though the same sort of thing – vastly different interpretations of British history constantly deployed to justify positions taken and maintained in the present – was likewise a commonplace of British politics and social discourse in Shaw’s own day, as indeed they are in ours. The past is used by everyone to interpret the present and so conflicting interpretations of the past are weapons in our public debates.

Is President Obama's foreign policy a repetition of the appeasement of Hitler associated with British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain or is it wisdom learned from the misbegotten military adventurism of George Bush? Is America today departing from the moral and spiritual foundation laid for her by her founding fathers, or is she finally embracing the confidence in human ingenuity and social and moral invention that her deist forefathers wished upon their infant country?

The speech, remember, was Stephen's reply to the high priest's question: "Are these accusations made against you true?" Stephen was facing a hostile court. He had few friends there. The Sanhedrin could be counted on to defend the understanding of the faith then current in conformist Judaism, that is, the Judaism represented by the Sadducees and the Pharisees. So his statement had to be fashioned in such a way that *first*, they would hear him out, *second* he could actually make clear that the problem was not *his* view of the law and the temple but *theirs*; and *third* that their treatment of Jesus and his followers was part and parcel of Israel's longstanding failure to honor the Lord's messengers, supremely Moses himself. Understood in *that* way, it was a brilliant piece of reasoning skillfully delivered.

What is more, we ought not to suppose that Stephen imagined that at the conclusion of his speech the priests and elders would all fall to their knees and ask him what they needed to do to be saved. He was bearing witness to Christ; very clearly he was not motivated by a desire to save his own skin. Had he been he could have said much less, taken a more mediating tone, and probably avoided a deadly confrontation. He doesn't get to Jesus until the very end, because had he mentioned him sooner, they would have cut him off and never let him finish.

But no one can miss his point and the Sanhedrin obviously didn't miss it. From his recital of Israel's history Stephen drew two conclusions, each one massively demonstrated in the biblical narrative. *First*, God's presence was never limited to any particular place. The living God is everywhere and can and does bless and save his people wherever they are. He called Abraham in Mesopotamia; he protected Joseph in Egypt; he called Moses from the burning bush in the wilderness of Midian. That spot, in the middle of nowhere, became holy ground, as we read in v.33. The tabernacle, Israel's sanctuary for centuries was a moveable tent!

Second, Israel had a long history of rebellion against the Lord, against his messengers, and against his law. In the conclusion of his speech Stephen summed up what his historical review had demonstrated: viz. that Israel had made a practice of persecuting those God sent to speak to them on his behalf and of persistently disobeying his law. Jesus, as you remember, had said the same thing, as had the prophets before him.

Indeed, if not immediately surely eventually, the priests and elders of the Sanhedrin must have realized that the comparison Stephen was making between Moses and Jesus served to compare the two figures as equally the subjects of Israel's betrayal. Moses too appeared at a low point in Israel's history, suffering cruel oppression in Egypt as the Jews were oppressed by the Romans in their day. Moses' ministry was authenticated by signs and wonders as the Lord's had been. Moses was rejected by his own people as Jesus had been. God was very obviously with Moses,

but Israel wasn't and, and this is Stephen's climactic point, God was with Jesus but they had betrayed and murdered him.

Nor can any appeal to the temple nullify the appointment of God or the disobedience and infidelity of his people. Jesus was an outsider to the Jewish establishment, he had no authority in the temple, but then again and again throughout biblical history, the Lord's servants had found themselves estranged from the religious establishment of Israel. In some ways, in the light of this biblical history, the rejection of Jesus was almost evidence that *he really was* the Messiah! If Israel had welcomed him with open arms, we would have reason to suspect that something was amiss.

Jeremiah made a point not dissimilar to Stephen's in his great "temple sermon," in Jeremiah 7. Particularly after having been gloriously rebuilt at tremendous expense by King Herod, the temple in Jerusalem, as Solomon's temple still was in Jeremiah's time, a very impressive building, or better, complex of buildings. It was impressive for its size, its architectural grandeur, and for its location, one of the great cities of the ancient world and a place that breathed Israel's long history as the people of God. It was very easy for an Israelite to think that such a temple virtually guaranteed Israel's fortune, that God must be on her side, that he was, as it were, almost required to preserve his people so as to preserve his temple. *If they had the temple they must be right with God!* To show you how easy it is to make such a mistake, let me point out that we Americans can think the same way: that our political institutions, our great buildings in Washington D.C., the purple mountains' majesty and the fruited plains, indemnify the United States against destruction or dissolution and virtually guarantee her place and prosperity in the future history of the world.

But it is not so. The temple that was understood as a talisman by Jeremiah's contemporaries was leveled to rubble by the Babylonians and Herod's great temple would be as thoroughly destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70. The more important fact was that Jesus was the true fulfillment of the temple – the presence of God with his people – and was himself the fulfillment of the Law of Moses. As Calvin beautifully put it: "No harm can be done to the temple and the law, when Christ is openly established as the end and truth of both." [Com. on Acts, I, 212]

Well then, now comes the obvious question? Was Stephen's interpretation of Israel's history correct? Was his argument sound? Was his defense persuasive? Well, Luke leaves us in no doubt about that from the beginning. We read once again, in 6:8 that not only was Stephen a man full of grace and power, but he too was doing great wonders and signs among the people. He too was healing the sick, as Peter and John had done. In other words, God himself was authenticating Stephen as his chosen messenger. Then we read in v. 10 that his opponents could not withstand his rhetoric, his biblical argument, or his oratorical power. And finally we read in v.15 that there was some glorious feature of his appearance that struck everyone who saw him at that moment. What more evidence could be asked for to prove that he was speaking from and for God himself?

But, the fact is, his argument drawn from Holy Scripture is irrefutable. And, remember, these men all were Bible believers. Even the Sadducees, who granted divine authority only to the Pentateuch, the first five books of what we call the Old Testament, would not and could not have

disputed the historical accuracy of Stephen's argument. Israel had been chronically rebellious throughout her history. Hers was a history of apostasy more than it was of faith and fidelity to the Word and the law of God, more of disobedience than obedience to the commandments of God.

It is simply a fact that an honest Jew in Stephen's day, who knew his Bible and believed it, should certainly have been alert to the danger that the people of God were once again under the boot of an oppressor for no other reason than that for the umpteenth time they were going their own way and betraying the covenant God had made with them. No one can read the history of Israel as it is reported in Holy Scripture and not be prepared for spiritual rebellion *among the people of God!*

Luke, remember, is telling us what we need to know to understand the place of the church in the world, to appreciate what challenges Christians will face and how they are to meet them, and to embrace our calling as witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ. The world will of course, prove an enemy, as will become clearer as the narrative of Acts proceeds and the church moves out of Judaism into the Gentile world. But the church herself will often prove an enemy, as it was here. A great many of the church's martyrs through the ages have been put to death by so-called Christians, as the first martyr, Stephen, was by those who would have identified themselves, as Christians do, as the people of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The world has always had its allies *in the church*, Satan's fifth column, if you will, subverting the gospel from within.

What is more, such opposition to the gospel and to those who proclaim it, whether from the church or the world, is deep-seated, visceral, and impervious to evidence or argument. It would cost faithful Christians through the ages rivers of blood, sweat, and tears. Don't make Stephen into a stone. The rocks that were striking him hurt as much as they would hurt anyone else. It was those repeated blows that finally beat the life out of him: one large stone to the head or the back of the neck perhaps finally killing him. The beheadings, the stonings, and the shootings continue still today. All over the world, spouses and children and other relatives are left heart-broken. The practitioners of other faiths and those with no faith but that in themselves have always been hostile to the Christian message, unwilling to believe it no matter how powerful the arguments that can be made on its behalf, no matter the transforming power it demonstrates in the lives of people who embrace its message of divine love with all their hearts. And the more aggressive the Christian witness, the more hostility it evokes. No one understood the hardness of the human heart and its willful unbelief better than did the Apostle Paul, the very man mentioned by name in 8:1. It was Paul who would later write: "the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot." No one had better reason to believe in Jesus than did the members of the Sanhedrin, the reality of his being sent from God had been demonstrated beyond all conceivable contradiction. But this intransigent unbelief, this unbelief perfectly willing to murder a host of innocent facts, is a fact writ large not only over the whole sweep of human history but over our own time and our own western culture. Anyone who wonders why the gospel is not believed more readily by people who are in such desperate need of it has not yet reckoned with the darkness in the human heart until Christ, by his Holy Spirit, shines his light there.

The violence against Christians and the indifference toward the gospel of Jesus Christ that is the dark side of the history of our world has been from the beginning the context of Christian witness. Paul knew that better than anyone. Like Stephen he would be stoned for bearing witness to Christ and like Stephen he would eventually be executed for being a powerful and persuasive advocate of the Christian message.

But, then, the mention of Saul or Paul's name as the last word in this episode is very obviously intended to remind us that the Lord is building his church and if the gates of hell cannot stand against it, mere human beings certainly cannot. The very man who persecuted the church was transformed by Christ into its greatest champion; the man who approved of Stephen's unjust and illegal killing, would spend his remaining years repenting of what he had done; the man who contrived to murder the first Christian martyr would become a Christian martyr himself; the man who so resented Stephen's witness to Christ became a still greater witness to that same Christ himself; and the man who saw miracles being performed and yet remained unconvinced, would later make a defense like Stephen's before the Sanhedrin, before the Roman governor, and before kings, and remind them that the great things that had been done by Christ and his apostles – including himself – were known to everyone, they were public knowledge, for, as he once put it to a pagan king, these things "were not done in a corner." [26:26] Evidence that he had once ignored, he now argued was irrefutable proof that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world and the King of Kings.

Perhaps that is where we should leave Stephen's martyrdom this morning. We live in a society that is daily becoming very like the society that was so offended by Stephen's goodness and by the truth that he spoke that it put this very good man to a sudden and cruel death. Often in history and in many parts of the world it is today much worse for Christians than it was in Jerusalem in Stephen's day. But always and everywhere, in one way or another, those who tell the stories of Christian witness and of Christian's suffering for the sake of that witness will with a wry smile and perhaps a twinkle in the eye assure us that all is well with words like these:

"And *Saul* approved of his execution."