

Paradigm of Christian Witness

A Sermon on Acts 6:8-8:1

Knox @ Faith PCA

March 3, 2024 PM

Throughout the last few chapters of Acts, we have seen a growing conflict between the Apostles and the Sadducees. It started in Chapter 4 with the official questioning of Peter and John in the wake of the healing of the lame man in the Temple Gate; it escalated in chapter 5 when the Sadducees arrested and beat all of the apostles after they healed multitudes in Solomon's portico while proclaiming Jesus.

This next section of Acts brings that conflict to its climax as unbelieving Jews stir up false witnesses against Stephen, as Stephen condemns the Jewish council for rejecting and murdering the Messiah, and as the council responds by stoning Stephen to death. These three scenes are all intimately related; together they tell the story of the first Christian martyr.

At the same time, these three scenes are dense with theological content, especially the middle scene in which Stephen gives the longest speech of Acts, one that rehearses the history of Israel. There are many themes we could draw out of this story, so many, in fact, that John Calvin preached 20 sermons from these verses, sometimes just drawing on one or two verses at a time.

While there are some advantages to going so slowly through a section like this, one of the disadvantages of such an approach is that it tends to lose the forest for the trees. While going at Calvin's pace would certainly enable us to explore a variety of edifying themes from this rehearsal of Israel's history, it would also hinder our ability to appreciate this defining moment in Steven's life. After all, this entire speech is only around 1300 words in an average English translation, which means that, on average, it would take about 10 minutes to deliver. And even if what we have recorded is only a representative sampling from Steven's speech, it's important to remember that this was all one speech, delivered in one climactic moment, all aimed at one goal: bearing faithful witness to Christ.

Originally I attempted to cover this whole section in one sermon under the theme of Christian witness. But as I wrote I found it nearly impossible to keep the sermon to a reasonable length. So, instead we will cover this story in two sermons, focusing this evening on Stephen's speech, ending at verse 53 of chapter 7.

As we read the text, ask yourself what it teaches us about Christian witness. Acts 6:8-7:53.

Please keep your Bibles open and may the Lord grace us with understanding, faith, and obedience to His word.

Our text gives us a paradigm of Christian witness.

First, it illustrates the mindset of Christian witness. Look again at Stephen's speech as a whole and think with me about his goal. Remember that Stephen has been accused, in 6:11-14, of speaking "blasphemous words against Moses and God." Specifically, the charges revolve around the ideas that 1) he is teaching that "Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place" and 2) that Jesus "will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." Stephen's speech is a public response to these charges. Notice the simple question of the high priest in 7:1, "Are these things so?"

As many commentators have pointed out, and as you probably noticed during the reading of this passage, Stephen doesn't directly answer those charges in his speech. Think about it. He could have simply said something like, "No, that's a misunderstanding of what I've been teaching. Actually, Jesus was referring to his body when he made that statement about the temple being destroyed and rebuilt in three days. Also, Jesus himself said that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Furthermore, our entire movement has centered around the temple and the law of Moses. We worship in the temple courtyards, and we preach from the Law and Prophets. And, most importantly, these men who brought me up on charges today are false witnesses." Whether or not such an approach would have saved Stephen's neck is hard to say, but at least he could have answered the charges directly and succinctly if that was his primary goal.

Now it's true that Stephen does indirectly touch on those two charges in his speech. At various points he makes positive comments about the law of Moses, and if you read the speech carefully you can find a positive theology of the temple that is tempered with a subtle critique of his audience's tendency to turn it into an idol...as if God could be contained or manipulated by His temple like a pagan God, rather than recognizing that He is sovereign and free to meet with His people whenever and however He chooses.

But when you read this speech, it's clear that neither of those points is the main thrust. Instead, Stephen's central focus is on showing a pattern of unfaithfulness throughout Israel's history which has now culminated in his audience's rejection and murder of their own Messiah. As one commentator put it, "The main intention of this prophetic-type utterance is to 'turn the tables' on his opponents by presenting an extensive indictment against them¹." The logic goes something like this...just as Jacob's sons (the fathers of his audience) rejected and mistreated the one who would later become their savior (namely, Joseph)... just as the Israelites repeatedly

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rejected Moses as their Ruler, Judge, and Redeemer...just as the kings and officials of Israel and Judah repeatedly rejected and persecuted the Lord's many prophets who called the people to repentance... so you ... (the Sadducees and Pharisees to whom Stephen is speaking) have done to Jesus, your Messiah.

Look again at verses 51-53 and notice how everything in his speech builds up to this indictment. Notice especially the second half of verse 51, "As your fathers did, so do you." That is a one-sentence-summary of Steven's speech.

The fact that Stephen focuses on indicting his fellow Jews for their rejection of Jesus instead of directly answering the two charges against him is instructive for us. It illustrates the mindset of Christian witness. Stephen was more concerned about presenting the gospel to his countrymen than he was about defending himself. His eagerness to persuade his fellow Jews of the gospel outweighed his anxiety to avoid their rejection or mistreatment.

Along those same lines, take a sneak peak at the scene of Stephen's martyrdom and notice his dying words in verse 60, "And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" Even as his fellow Jews were killing him, Stephen was thinking of their salvation.

This is the mindset of Christian witness: always looking for an opportunity to present Christ as Lord and Savior.

A few years ago, the importance of having an opportunity mindset hit me square between the eyes. While serving at my former church my guitar was stolen out of my office by a drug addict looking for quick cash. He broke into the church building through a Sunday school room window in the middle of the night, climbed through the ceiling of the office space, rifled through a bunch of papers in the church office, and grabbed the guitar that I kept in my office for youth and children's events. Thankfully I had kept the original receipt and a picture of the serial number so when it turned up at the pawn shop down the street, I was able to claim it. This was also good because it allowed the Pawn Shop to identify to the police who the thief was and later apprehend him.

The problem for me was that the pawn shop wanted me to pay to get my guitar back. I was angry. Why should I have to pay the pawn shop the same amount that the thief made by "selling" my guitar? Couldn't the pawn shop at least absorb half of that cost? It felt unjust...as if I was paying the thief to steal from me.

Now, thankfully, the church graciously offered to pay the price for me. But I was still angry when I got to the Pawn Shop to retrieve my guitar. I was certainly not in the mood to do evangelism.

But as it turns out, in order to get my guitar back, I would have to wait until the police showed up at the Pawn shop (I can't remember why), which ended up taking about 45 minutes. So there I was, sitting with the Pawn shop owner, both of us just waiting for the police to arrive. And, of course, the Pawn Shop owner had no idea how irritated I was and, like a typical Southerner, jumped straight into a friendly conversation, asking what I do for work. Begrudgingly I admitted that I was a pastor, and, still not catching on to the irritation in my passive-aggressive, curt responses, he began to open up his life to me and ask a number of spiritual and theological questions, which often happens when people find out that you are a pastor. As it turns out, he was something of a lapsed, secularized Jew who had a strong interest in the Bible and Christianity.

Like a practice pitcher at batting practice who repeatedly throws homerun pitches straight over the plate, he told me all about his life and asked me, the pastor, about the grace of God, the Bible, and more. And, to my shame, I let the pitches pass me by, striking out, not because the questions were too complicated or too hard, but because this wasn't what I had signed up for. I had come to the Pawn Shop to claim what was mine, and to get out of there as quickly as I could, and maybe to express a little bit of my frustration...not to share Jesus. I was totally caught off-guard by this moment and couldn't make the emotional pivot necessary to stop seeing this man as an unjust adversary and start seeing him as a sinner in need of Jesus.

In his first epistle, Peter exhorts us to "always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you." Stephen's sermon here is a reminder to us that many times our best opportunities to do that are found in the moments when we are frustrated, inconvenienced, troubled, mistreated, suffering, or unexpectedly presented with an opportunity to serve. The simple question for us is, "Are we looking for those opportunities?" Do we have an opportunity-mindset?

This is the mindset of Christian witness.

Secondly, our text shows us the skill of Christian witness. Look again at Stephen's sermon and think about the way it is organized. Commentators, scholars, and Bible readers have often disagreed and puzzled over this speech. Why is it so long? Why does Stephen go into so much detail as he rehearses the history of Israel? Why does he place so much emphasis on Joseph and Moses while mostly skipping over other parts of Israel's history like the books of Kings and Chronicles? Why does the tone start off somewhere between conciliatory and neutral, and wind up being accusatory and confrontational?

There are a number of ways to analyze Stephen's speech, but the one I find most helpful is found in Ben Witherington's commentary. He argues that Stephen's speech here in chapter 7 is modelled on a common rhetorical structure of antiquity which consists of 5 parts: 1) an

introduction or call to attention (first half of verse 2), 2) a narration that builds rapport with the audience and sets the stage for arguments prior to presenting them (you can see that in the narration of patriarchal history in verses 2-34) 3) a transition and/or proposition that introduces the main theme or argument (Israel's rejection of Moses in verse 35) 4) the development of the argument (the pattern of Israel rejecting her leaders in verses 36-50) 5) the concluding emotional appeal (the indictment of Israel's current leadership for rejecting Jesus verses 51-53).

I find this analysis helpful because it not only explains why Stephen's speech is so long and detailed, but also why the tone gradually shifts from conciliatory to accusatory. Notice, for example, how Stephen starts the speech by talking positively about "our father Abraham" (verse 2) and "our fathers" the patriarchs (verse 11 and 12), but he ends the speech by speaking negatively of "your fathers" who always resisted the Holy Spirit and persecuted the prophets (verses 51-52).

By rehearsing their shared history but emphasizing certain details and themes, Stephen is killing two birds with one stone. First, he is building a bridge of sympathy with a hostile audience. Surely Stephen knew that if he had simply launched into the indictment of verses 51-53, his audience would have immediately run him off the stage. So, instead he takes the long route, starting by appealing to their shared history and common identity as Jews. But, secondly, he retells that history in such a way that he plants the seeds of his indictment all along the way. There are hints of Jesus even in the first half of this speech: like Abraham, Jesus was a pilgrim. Like Joseph, he was rejected by his brothers. And in the second half of the speech, the comparisons between Jesus and Moses gradually become more obvious. Jesus is the one sent from God to be the Judge, Ruler, Redeemer, and Lawgiver of Israel, but Israel repeatedly rejects Him.

By gradually bringing these themes into focus as he rehearses this history, Stephen is subtly and slowly turning the tables on the two charges against him. Stephen has been accused of altering the law of Moses. But Stephen reminds his audience in verse 37 that the Law predicted another Moses a greater prophet and redeemer to come. Moreover, his speech throughout reminds his audience that the Israelites have a long history of breaking Moses' law, which, ironically, they are doing in this very scene, not only by rejecting the prophesied Messiah, Jesus, but also by putting Stephen on trial with the help of false witnesses.

Stephen has been accused of dishonoring the temple. But Stephen's speech is a reminder to the Jews that God's presence transcends any building. Notice the quotation near the end of the speech from Isaiah which emphasizes God's transcendence: He is the infinite, creator God. The whole point of the temple was not that God would be contained, limited, or unconditionally bound to a building. Such a formulaic approach to God is at the heart of paganism and idolatry, as if God was a genie in a bottle or lucky rabbit's foot. Instead, the whole

point of the temple was that it was the place where God made himself known to His people, where He would draw to bless them when they drew near to Him in repentance and faith.

And this explains why Stephen brings up the many references to idolatry. Stephen is subtly drawing out the point that the Jews have become like their fathers, using the temple like pagan idolaters, thinking that if they just do the right rituals and speak the right words, they can be assured of God's blessing, regardless of their heart condition. But what counts is a heart of faith and repentance- what he calls a circumcised heart. Stephen reminds us here that a circumcised heart is itself a temple of God; notice as well the way he emphasizes that God was **with** Joseph (7:9). Similarly, any place where God makes His presence felt and known is a holy place. Notice Stephen's mention of the "holy ground" near the burning bush (verse 33). On the other hand, the temple and the law of Moses with uncircumcised hearts is devoid of God's blessing and favorable presence.

Stephen here is expressing in Old Testament terminology a theme prominently emphasized in the epistles of the New Testament: that the temple of God is not a building; it's the people of God.

And, sadly, what Stephen is ultimately implying about his audience is that, while they have the law of Moses and the temple, while they have a biological connection to Abraham and the covenant of circumcision...in the deepest sense, they aren't truly the people of God. While their bodies may have been marked with circumcision, they are uncircumcised in their hearts and ears. They resist the Spirit of God instead of being the place where He dwells. When God himself appeared to them in the person of Christ, they crucified Him.

If time permitted, much more could be said about the skillfulness of Stephen's speech. We could go on and on about how well he knew his Bible, how well he knew his audience, and how well he knew the art of rhetoric. But for now, suffice it to say that this is not only theologically sound, but also a well-crafted piece of rhetoric, something that even the Greeks rhetoricians could have been proud of.

And that observation leads us to an important principle of Christian witness, which is that we should strive to communicate skillfully while also being dependent on the Holy Spirit. Whatever rhetorical analysis you prefer, Stephen's speech is clearly well-crafted. And this theme of skillful communication in the service of witness is one that we will continue to see in the book of Acts. For example, in Acts 17 Paul will preach an evangelistic sermon to philosophically minded Greeks in Athens. In that sermon Paul will quote Greek poets instead of Old Testament prophets and will riff on the inscription found on a pagan idol shrine rather than rehearsing Israel's history. While the approach is completely different to suit a different audience, it is equally skillful.

But skillful communication isn't limited to the evangelistic sermons of Acts. The Proverbs have a great deal to teach us both explicitly and implicitly about persuasive speech. The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that its author, who was a King and teacher of Israel, devoted much of his life to the study and presentation of persuasive words. And more generally, the Bible itself is a masterclass in skillful communication across a variety of genres: narrative, poetry, parable, proverbs, letters, prophetic oracles, and far more.

I think this ought to be an encouragement to us as Christians. It validates the study of rhetoric, of literature, of the language arts, of logic, and of debate. It validates the inherent desire that many of us have to communicate skillfully and shows us that those inclinations can be brought into the service of Christ and His kingdom. Clearly, God was not only concerned about what He would say in His word, but how He would say it. We can and should be too.

But at the same time, this must be tempered by prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit. The more knowledge and skill we acquire, the greater the temptation for us to trust in our words, our reasoning, and our force of personality to accomplish what only the Lord can do. Stephen's sermon is not only a validation of the pursuit of excellent communication, it is also a reality check about its limitations. Despite preaching a passionate, Biblical, well-reasoned, well-crafted sermon, Stephen's audience was not only unconvinced, but they interrupted him before he finished and killed him. Let that be a humbling reminder to us that our words are simply means which the Lord may wield however he wishes. On the other hand, a few chapters down the road Luke describes Lydia's conversion this way, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul."

Commentators sometimes speculate about whether Stephen, given his Greek-speaking, Hellenistic background, may have had some training in Greek rhetoric. It's hard to say. But what we can say for sure is that Stephen's speech was a fulfillment of the promise that Jesus makes to all of his disciples in Luke 12:11-12, "And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

So, Christian, study your Bible so that you can have it at the ready, like Stephen, when the time comes. If you have the time and inclination, read books of apologetics, philosophy, or rhetoric. Students, do your homework and learn to enjoy writing those essays and reading those the corrections and comments from your teachers about how to be a better communicator.

But, more importantly, pray, and depend upon the Holy Spirit to produce the fruit that only He can.

The skill of Christian witness.

And, thirdly, our text shows us the focus of Christian witness. A few months ago we looked at Psalm 110, and saw the typology present in the figure of Melchizedek. Here in this sermon, Stephen rehearses the history of Israel with a similar lense, and so I want to remind you of this definition of typology from one of Dr Rayburn's sermons, *'Typology,' someone has said, 'is God's fingerprint on history.' He has woven into history people, events, and institutions that prefigure and reveal the meaning of his kingdom and, especially, the unfolding of salvation in the life and work of the Messiah.*

Look again at this passage with me and notice how the major figures that Stephen organizes his speech around point us to Jesus. Like Jesus, Abraham was a man of faith. Both were outsiders and pilgrims in the promised land. Both entrusted themselves completely to the father, walking by the promises of God. Like Jesus, Joseph was favored by His father and rejected by his brothers. He suffered innocently in exile, resisted temptation, and showed the obvious blessing of God on his life despite his adversities and adversaries. Joseph was elevated above his brothers as a prince, vindicated as the righteous one, and presented to his brothers as their savior. Likewise, Jesus was elevated, vindicated, and presented to his brothers as their savior in His resurrection and Ascension to the right hand of God. Moses was set apart by God from birth, was prepared in the wilderness, and was sent by God to be the ruler, judge, and redeemer of Israel. So was Jesus. Moses went up on a mountain to receive the law from God; Jesus went up on a mountain to give a sermon which rightly interpreted and applied God's law. Moses was repeatedly rejected by Israel...so was Jesus. When Moses tried to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land, they said, let's go back to Egypt. When Jesus offered them the kingdom of God, they said, "we have no King but Caesar." When Solomon built the temple of the Lord, the Israelites brought about its destruction by their covenant breaking. When the Lord himself came and tabernacled among them in the Incarnation, the Israelites destroyed the temple of His body.

Over and over again, Stephen shows his audience that Christ is the theme of the Scriptures. Christ is pictured, foreshadowed, and predicted in a myriad of ways in the Hebrew Bible, and so it is the greatest folly, blindness, and tragedy not to recognize him now as the Messiah.

We could say that Stephen's sermon

Reminder to make Christ the ultimate aim and emphasis of our witness. Certainly there is a place for apologetics, philosophy, politics, cultural engagement...the gospel has implications and those implications may be helpful entry points with unbelievers...but the core of our message is not an idea, a program, a set of morals, a philosophy, an ideology, or a movement...it's a person named Jesus Christ. He is the point of integration, the Lord of all, the one in whom all things hold together.

The tendency for our witness/message to be reductionistic: interested in politics, reduced to an agenda. If you are a 1 on the Anniegram (reformer) to reduce it to morals/code. If you are a bleeding heart liberal, to reduce it to a posture or program of compassion. If you are philosophically inclined, to reduce Christian witness to apologetics. If you are theologically inclined, to reduce witness to doctrinal precision. Kuyperian- cultural engagement.

But it is, sadly, tragically, possible to have each of these things without having Christ. the Sadducees are living illustrations of that. They had the temple and a social movement. The pharisees had a rigorous moral code and a more robust set of doctrines than the Sadducees.

But neither had Christ.

While politics, philosophy, cultural engagement, compassion, doctrinal precision, and morals can and should all have a role to play in our witness, they all will all be empty and lifeless if Christ isn't at the core.

Apologetics without Christ is simply philosophical debating. Compassion without Christ is sentimentality. Cultural engagement without Christ is obnoxious. Doctrinal wrangling without Christ is tiresome.

Faithful Christian witness is overflow of love for Christ. As Paul David Tripp is fond of repeating, "You can't give away what you don't have." If we don't see Christ in creation,

Of course it is helpful to have programs and training in evangelism...but perhaps what we most need is to pray that the Lord would rekindle our love for Christ. After all, it is nearly impossible not to speak about what and whom we love. At its best, Christian witness is an overflow of love for Christ.

Stephen saw Christ in all of Scripture...also literally saw him in this climactic moment of witness...which leads us to our fourth point...