

Acts 7:1

Then the high priest asked him, “Are these charges true?”

A substantial proportion of the book that we call ‘Acts’ is given over to what was said

- Indeed about a quarter of it is direct speech
- There are 32 speeches in Acts, excluding short statements
- And there are six major sermons of which this is the third and longest
- The first sermon was given by Peter on the day of Pentecost
- The second sermon was given by Peter at Solomon’s Colonnade
- After the healing of the lame man
- This third sermon is given by Stephen

Various charges have been brought against Stephen, one of the seven appointed (Acts 6)

- That he has spoken blasphemy against Moses and against God (Acts 6:11)
- That he speaks against this holy place (the temple) and against the law (Acts 6:13)
- What we, therefore, are calling a sermon is sometimes called a defence
- Though this defence, which is a defence on a capital charge (blasphemy)
- Is not a personal defence, calculated to secure acquittal before the court (Sanhedrin)
- Rather it is a defence of pure Christianity, as God’s appointed way of worship

Everything we know about Stephen comes from Acts 6 and 7

- In these chapters, we see

- I STPEHEN: THE MAN
- II STEPHEN: THE MESSENGER
- III STEPHEN: THE MARTYR

I STEPHEN: THE MAN

It is clear that in Stephen was an outstanding man

- He was a ‘man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 6:5)
- He was a ‘man full of God’s grace and power’ (Acts 6:8)
- He spoke with wisdom and by the Spirit (Acts 6:10)

One of the striking things about these three statements from Acts 6

- Is they show Stephen as a balanced Christian
- Today ‘balance’ is used to suggest moderation
- ‘what you need here is a right sense of balance’
- but in the New Testament what we find is a sense of wholeness, roundness
- in Stephen’s life the man, the message, the martyrdom go together
- in Stephen balance refers to total obedience and not to moderation
- he was full of faith of the Holy Spirit
- he was full of God’s grace and power
- he spoke with wisdom and by the Holy Spirit
- these characteristics were shown in the way he spoke and the way he lived
- that is his thinking, his speaking and his living were under the grace of God

In the Methodist tradition we have set great store by the 'warmed heart'

- most Methodists know that at a decisive point in his spiritual journey
- John Wesley wrote that while he was listening to someone read
- a commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans by Martin Luther
- he felt his heart 'strangely warmed'
- such a description recalls the two disciples on the road to Emmaus
- who after having heard the risen Lord Jesus open the scriptures
- said to one another, 'were not our hearts burning within us' (Luke 24:32)
- but we should not forget that immediately after the walk to Emmaus
- Luke, in his gospel, includes the appearance of Jesus to the disciples
- 'then he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures' (Luke 24:45)
- an opened mind without a warmed heart is a dreary state
- we have such a situation faithfully chronicled in John Wesley's *Journal*
- but equally a warmed heart without an opened mind is a spiritual rollercoaster
- sometimes on the mountain top, sometimes in the depths
- but in Stephen we see the combination of the warmed heart and opened mind
- full of faith of the Holy Spirit, full of God's grace and power
- speaking with wisdom and by the Holy Spirit

It is important that we, who are Christians in the present age, are equally complete

- we must outlive and outthink those who oppose the gospel
- we outlive those who oppose the gospel with the heart of faith and the mind of faith
- for it is impossible to make right choices in our lives without the witness in our hearts
- and it is equally impossible to make right choices without the scriptures in our minds
- we outthink those who oppose the gospel with heart of faith and the mind of faith
- for it is impossible to say right things in our lives without the witness in our hearts
- and it is equally impossible to say the right things without the scriptures in our minds
- we must ensure that there is no hindrance to the infilling of the Spirit in our hearts
- we must ensure that there is no hindrance to the witness of the scriptures in our minds
- it is not enough to be a sincere person with the heart of faith
- it is not enough to be a sincere person with the mind of faith
- we must have hearts and minds that are renewed by the spirit and the scriptures

In fact, it is not really quite as straightforward as a matter of heart and head

- for in the Bible the word of God is hidden in the believer's heart
- every bit as much as the Spirit of God renews the mind
- it is important that we know the scriptures
- and it is important that we let the scriptures speak penetratingly
- to our hearts and minds
- it is important that there is no hindrance to the infilling of the Spirit in our hearts
- it is important that there is no hindrance to the witness of the scriptures in our minds
- we must therefore be ready for the Lord's use
- purified from all that is not fitting
- and ready to do his will (2 Tim. 2:20-21)
- it is by prayer that we make sure that we are in tune with the mind of the Spirit
- it is by reading the scripture and attending to God's word
- by reading, studying and listening to Bible preaching we are in tune with the word

II STEPHEN: THE MESSENGER

People at the synagogue could not object to Stephen as a person

- he did great wonders and signs among the people
- it was not his personality but his preaching that caused such hostility
- when they argued with him, Stephen's opponents were outwitted
- he got the better of them
- through his study of the scriptures and the witness of the Spirit
- he was given just the right words to say
- consequently, opposition was stirred up through false witness
- and Stephen was seized and brought before the Sanhedrin

His accusers alleged

- he has spoken blasphemy against Moses and against God (Acts 6:11)
- he speaks against this holy place (the temple) and against the law (Acts 6:13)
- because of this Stephen launches into a long statement of Israel's history
- from which he shows that veneration of the land and temple gave them religion
- religion with no room for the Messiah, Jesus
- he shows that rejection of God's appointed in the past
- led them idolatry, which spills over into immorality
- he showed them that this had continued in the present with the rejection of Jesus
- Stephen therefore disassociates himself from the nation and its refusal of God
- And gives glory to Jesus, exalted at the right hand of God

From the history of Israel, Stephen shows that God is not confined to the Holy Land

- God appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia and Haran (not Israel)
- It was Abraham's personal trust in God that was most important not the land
- Later, the venue for God's dealings with the sons of Jacob (the patriarchs) was Egypt
- Even in a foreign land, God was with Joseph and his brothers
- The climax of Stephen's account of Moses (Acts 7:33) shows
- God was with Moses in Egypt, at Midian, and in the wilderness
- When God appeared to Moses, the ground was holy but it was not Israel
- God performed wonders in Egypt, at the Red Sea and in the wilderness
- He gave the law on Mount Sinai (not of these was Israel)
- The Jews respected the law and Moses the law-giver
- And yet even Moses spoke of a prophet would come (Deuteronomy 18:15)
- Who would be rejected by his own people, just as Jesus had been rejected

Stephen continued by saying that worship acceptable to God is not confined to the temple

- The burning bush was holy ground and Moses had to remove his sandals
- Moses was given living words at Mount Sinai
- The tabernacle and the temple were built as God commanded
- And though Stephen does not speak against either
- He points out that the creator of heaven and earth is not confined (Isa. 66:1-2)
- Everything necessary for pure worship was available in the wilderness
- Before they ever entered the Holy Land, let alone built the temple

Stephen shows that the Jews have constantly rejected God's representatives

- Joseph was rejected by his brothers
- Moses was rejected by the two Hebrews fighting each other
- The message of Moses was rejected in favour of a golden calf
- It seems as if the audience had become so restive that Stephen ends abruptly
- If it appears that Stephen spoke more about Jesus than about Moses
- It is because his defence comes from accusations about Moses
- Nevertheless, he points to one significant thing that Moses said about Jesus
- 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people' (Acts 7:37)
- (Acts 7:52) they even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One
- and now *you* have betrayed and murdered him

All this represents what you might call 'knowledge on fire'

- it is that relationship between the warmed heart and the open mind
- Stephen is saturated in scripture and applies scripture to challenges around him
- Eventually, this is issued in direct challenge
- 'stiff-necked was fixed in Israel's memory
- as God's own description of the nation when it rebelled against Moses
- and worshipped the golden calf (not only an image but indicative of a fertility cult)
- 'uncircumcised hearts and ears' recalls God's judgment on those who turned away
- they may have the rite of circumcision but in effect it was vain
- for they were still unbelieving at heart and as deaf to the truth as their fathers
- Stephen's accusation is that nothing has been learned from the past
- For a more terrible crime has been committed in the present
- The betrayal and murder of the 'Righteous One'
- By those were so smug about Israel's past failures
- They may well have the law but they have not obeyed it
- The temple and the law point to the Messiah Jesus whom they have rejected

The application of such a sermon today is not straightforward

- But the underlying principles remain the same
- It is possible to have religion with no room for the Messiah, Jesus
- We may not have a particular idea about the land of Israel
- But many people have been deceived into thinking that their sanctuary (chapel)
- Is of the very essence of Christian faith
- Like the Jews of New Testament times who did not see beyond the building
- So it is possible for us today not to be able to see beyond our building
- Or, more subtle still, all the things that happen there
- It is all very well and good to talk about all that happens at church
- But at best it is mere religion if it does not give room for Jesus

The idolatry of the golden calf

- We should realise that this is not just an artistic object
- The Egyptians, close neighbours of the Hebrews, worshipped living bulls
- As incarnations of pagan deities
- The Babylonians revered the bull as the symbol of the greatest gods
- Such idolatrous worship often spilled over into immorality

It is important for us to note that any misrepresentation of God is serious

- That is why we rely on the divine revelation in Holy Scripture
- This is where God has revealed himself to humanity
- Supremely in Jesus – not the only source but the controlling source of revelation

In the genteel environment of so much of the contemporary church

- A broad and liberal tolerance has become the order of the day
- Indeed, we could safely say of some people
- That the only thing of which they are intolerant is ‘intolerance’
- It is important to say that some uptight people are unpleasant to be around
- Because they always seem to be ranting and raving against evil
- It is an extreme to avoid, but we must also avoid the opposite extreme
- There are times when we need to declare against and disassociate from what is wrong

It is against the background of religion

- With no room for the Messiah Jesus
- And a track record of rejection of God’s appointed people in the past
- That continued into the present with the rejection of Jesus
- That Stephen therefore declares against the religion of the day
- And disassociates himself from the nation and its refusal of God
- And gives glory to Jesus, exalted at the right hand of God
- With the inevitable consequence that Stephen the Messenger will be

III STEPHEN: THE MARTYR

This is the third portrayal that Luke has given of a trial scene

- The first trial of Peter and John ended in threatenings (Acts 4:17, 21)
- The second trial ended with the apostles being flogged (Acts 5:40)
- The third trial ended with a stoning and the first martyr (Acts 7:58-60)

When Judea became a Roman province, only the governor could pass the death sentence

- An exception was an offence (in word or deed) against the sanctity of the temple
- When the Sanhedrin could pass the death sentence
- Not long before Stephen stood before them
- The Sanhedrin had tried to convict Christ of speaking against the temple
- But they failed and as a result took him to Pilate the Roman governor
- But with Stephen they succeeded

The obvious similarity between Stephen’s countenance (Acts 6:15)

- and the face of Moses whom they claim to revere is lost on them
- and yet, it is a disposition of heart that continues
- when the people gnashed their teeth at him in fury
- Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit and had a clear vision of Christ
- When they stoned him, he prayed to God asking that their sin be not held against them
- The similarities between Stephen’s actions and those of Jesus are plain to see

Stephen’s vision recalls the words of Jesus himself

‘Look, Stephen said, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’

(Acts 7:56)

Jesus had stood before this same tribunal and had been condemned

- Because, when the high priest charged him on oath to say if he were the Messiah

Jesus replied:

‘I am ... and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’

(Mark 14:62)

Stephen was saying, in effect, that his vision confirmed Jesus’ claim

- And condemned the council for having rejected him
- Unless the council were prepared to admit their awful error and repent
- They had no option but to find Stephen guilty of blasphemy
- For it is Jesus, at God’s right hand, who provides access into the divine presence
- A Saviour who is beyond land, law or temple

It was the heavenly vision confirming the word of truth in the scriptures

- That gave Stephen courage (Psalm 110:1-2)
- It is a path that Saul, standing in witness to Stephen’s death will soon take

And so in Stephen we witness the death of the first Christian martyr

- The word ‘martyr’ is a Greek word meaning ‘witness’
- And yet for us it means witness that is faithful to death
- Preaching and healing in the name of Jesus resulted in threatenings
- Preaching the resurrection of Jesus resulting in a flogging
- But not negotiating on the uniqueness of Jesus resulted in martyrdom

It is easy to be either sensationalist or complacent in the present age

- And yet we must be clear that we need faithful men and women
- Like Stephen the Man; ‘full of faith and of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 6:5)
- ‘full of God’s grace and power’ (Acts 6:8);
- speaking with wisdom and by the Spirit (Acts 6:10)
- with warmed hearts and opened minds
- we need faithful men and women like Stephen the Messenger
- who will speak boldly against religion that has no room for the Messiah Jesus
- who will point out that God’s messengers have always been persecuted
- who will show that idolatry will often spill over into immorality
- that will offer a direct challenge and disassociated from disobedience
- giving glory to Jesus, exalted at the right hand of God
- in these islands for a couple of hundred years or more such men and women
- have been regarded as merely eccentric or somewhat fanatical
- but should the time come when we are challenged no more to speak in this name
- not to preach the resurrection, to deny the Lordship, uniqueness and divinity of Jesus
- then, as in other places, we need faithful men and women like Stephen the Martyr