

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

The Church Alive – The People God Uses to Spread the Gospel Acts 6:7-15

7 The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. 8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. 9 But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. 10 But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. 13 They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." 15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

When Lou Little was coaching Football at Georgetown, he had a player who was definitely third rate but had so much spirit he was an inspiration to the team. He rarely saw action except in the last few minutes of a game that was already decided. One day news came that the boy's father had died. The young man came to Little and said: "Coach, I want to ask something of you that means an awful lot to me. I want to start the game against Fordham. I think that's what my father would have liked most."

Little hesitated a moment, then said: "Okay, son, you'll start, but you'll only be in there for a play or two. You aren't quite good enough and you know it." The boy started the game...and played so well Little never took him out. His play inspired the team to victory. Back in the locker room, Coach Little embraced the young man and said: "Son, you were terrific. You never played that way before . . . what got into you?"

The boy answered: "Remember how my father and I used to walk around arm-in-arm? There was something about him very few people knew...he was totally blind. And so, this afternoon was the first time my father ever saw me play."

The church needs people like this young man, people who are perceived as only being third rate, but as they realize they are being watched, will give all that they have to the point of inspiring others to do the same. And while we may give thought to the fact that others in the church as well as in the world are watching us; let us not forget that the true audience is but One, our God. Throughout the history of the church, God raises up people who could be called pacesetters; those who set the pace; or raise the standard for those around them to follow. They rise up from the ranks of the ordinary, but God makes them extraordinary.

People like Christopher Love (1618-1651); who upon his beheading for faith in Christ prayed:

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Most Glorious and eternal Majesty, Thou art righteous and holy in all Thou dost to the sons of men, though Thou hast suffered men to condemn Thy servant, Thy servant will not condemn Thee. He justifies Thee though Thou cuttest him off in the midst of his days and in the midst of his ministry, blessing Thy glorious name, that though he be taken away from the land of the living, yet he is not blotted out of the Book of the Living....

Hear the testimony of David Brainerd (1718-1747), a man who greatly motivated Jonathan Edwards. He said,

"When I really enjoy God, I feel my desires of Him the more insatiable, and my thirstings after holiness the more unquenchable; ... Oh, for holiness! Oh, for more of God in my soul! Oh, this pleasing pain! It makes my soul press after God ... Oh, that I might not loiter on my heavenly journey!"

And Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813-1843); once noted:

Read part of the life of Jonathan Edwards. How feeble does my spark of Christianity appear beside such a sun! But even his was a borrowed light, and the same source is still open to enlighten me.

In more recent times, we have Jim Elliot (1927-1956) who penned those often quoted words in his journal, October 28, 1949:

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.

You may or may not know the story behind each of these men; however, they all have at least three things in common. First, they all deeply loved and served the Lord. Second, they all died at a young age because of their faith in Jesus Christ; Love at 32; Brainerd at 29; M'Cheyne at 29; and Elliot at 28. Third, they all have greatly inspired other Christians to love and serve God and His people. These men were pacesetters and God calls us to either follow the pacesetter's pace or, better yet, to be a pacesetter.

In our Acts 6:7-15 text, we have one of the church's very first pacesetters; a man named Stephen. Stephen was no ordinary man. Indeed, he would have the distinction of going down in history as the first Christian martyr. In these early chapters of Acts, we find the church, body of Christ, making an impact on its world and we are told how it made that impact. Yes, God was working. Yes, the Spirit of God was filling and empowering the saints. But, here is the key, that God uses instruments, individuals to do His work, people like you and me who are committed wholly unto Him. People like Stephen, who when given the opportunity get into the "game" played for the greatest audience of all, an audience of One; that is God. Let us remember that the church is made up of individuals, and the church moves ahead when individuals do what Stephen did. Over the past couple of weeks, we have looked at Stephen's character; but now let us note two commitments that Stephen made that simply flow out of a person who is a follower of Christ. From his example in Acts 6:7-15, we discover two these two commitments if we would be pacesetters for the church.

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:3).

I. To be a pacesetter, you must be committed to serve (8).

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

Let me remind you of what is going on in Acts 6. The church had experienced some growing pains, which resulted in an internal conflict. Some of the Greek-speaking Jews complained against the Hebrew-speaking Jews that their widows were being neglected in the church’s “soup kitchen” ministry – we see this in 6:1. The apostles tackled this problem head on.

First, they clarified the church’s priorities to the Word of God in verse 2 saying, ***“It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.”*** Second they came up with a solution in verse 3 saying, ***“Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.”***

This is what happened as the church chose seven servants—some have called them the church’s first “deacons” – but they were not deacons, as we would later see in the New Testament. But one of these men was Stephen, who is mentioned first in verse 5, implying his status as a “pacesetter”; as one would willingly lead the way. And in what did he led the way? Notice in verse 5 that the first mention of his name occurs in a context of service. A pacesetter must be committed to serve. It becomes obvious that Stephen not only loved God (for this was recognized by the peoples’ choosing him), but that he also loved people, both within and, as we will see, outside of the church. Let us note this.

That he served *in* the church is clear in the context. He served the widows’ meals. By way of application, let us be reminded that we have been saved to serve. We find a man who was committed to *his* local church; a man willing to serve in any capacity he was asked. What was his grand ministry? To wait on tables. It is an interesting aside that the name “Stephen” means “a crown” or “a victor’s garland” in Greek. And Stephen was truly a crown in the early church, a pacesetter. He loved his church, and he was delighted to serve in it. He wanted God to be real in the lives of His people and one of the best ways he knew how to accomplish this was to serve others in the church. How do you serve others in the church?

But Stephens love did not remain just in the church. Beginning in verse 8 we find him serving outside the church as well, ***performing great wonders and signs among the people.*** Wow, there is a jump. From serving table and food, to performing extraordinary signs and wonders. The apostles did this same thing. Notice back in Acts 5:12 where we read, ***“At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people...”*** What was the purpose of such signs and wonders? The purpose was to authenticate the gospel message they preached. Remember that the apostles had laid hands on Stephen in Acts 6:6, commissioning him to the ministry. He had received power to be a witness for Christ; not simply to wait tables; but in addition to that, to spread the gospel of Christ.

And here is where things get really interesting. We read the book of Acts at times forgetting all the things that took place for the very first time. And it would seem that Stephen, in this commitment to serve, was not afraid to try something new in order to reach people with the gospel. Stephen was innovated. For up to this point, the church’s outreach consisted mainly of preaching in the temple courts (2:46; 5:20) and going house to house (5:42). But from what we read in verse 9, it would appear that Stephen took the gospel into the synagogues; the teaching places of the Jews. Why would he go there? He went there because he knew there would be people who needed to hear about the Messiah. This is the first time we see this, a simple

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strategy. Knowing that the people in the synagogue would be studying the Old Testament Scriptures, he went there to tell them something they did not yet know or understand. And what was it that they did not understand? They did not understand how the Savior, that is Jesus, as predicted by the Old Testament, had come. Stephen went into the synagogues and debated with the men. Why is this important to note? It is important to note because in a few years from this point in the church’s history, someone else would practiced the same strategy of synagogue evangelism. Who is this someone? You know him by the name of Paul. For example, in Acts 14:1, listen to what Paul did; **“In Iconium they (Paul and Barnabus) entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks.”**

This became Paul’s custom, to evangelize in the synagogues whenever he entered a new town. Where did he learn this strategy? Could it be he learned it from Stephen, along with many other things? Some have said, “If there had been no Stephen, humanly speaking, there would have been no Paul.” We know that Paul listened to Stephen in Acts 6 and 7, although at the time, not as a follower of Christ, but as a persecutor of the church. At this point in his life, Paul (then known as Saul) was a devout Pharisee. And in Acts 8:1, when the mob stoned Stephen, Paul was there **“in hearty agreement with putting him [Stephen] to death”**

Anyway, I am getting ahead of myself. If we would be a pacesetter for the church; if we want to make a difference in the lives of people, it begins with a commitment to serve. When you see or hear of a need in the church, do something about it. Serve the church. Too many people are content to watch the race go by. I ask you to get involved both in the lives of believers in the church and non-believers outside the church. Find a way to serve. This brings us to the second commitment we find in Stephen’s life; a commitment that is to be ours as well...

II. To be a pacesetter, you must be committed to suffer (9-15).

But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.

According to 2 Timothy 3:12 we read, **“Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”** Seemingly good or bad, that is yet a guarantee. I would have you see what happens to Stephen beginning in verse 9. The verse starts with **“some men”** and ends with **“rose up and argued with Stephen.”** Here begins the opposition. Here is something the church can count on. If we would speak of Christ, we will see opposition. But here is another guarantee; that where there is opposition, there is also opportunity. One of the things that stands out about Stephen is his *Christlikeness*. I cannot think of any better compliment to hear from someone else than this; to hear someone say, *“You remind me of Christ.”* Beloved, Stephen reminds us of Christ. How?

A. Stephen experienced the same things Jesus did (Acts 6:9-14)

What was it that Jesus experienced that we see Stephen also experiencing in our text? There are four parallels.

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1. The people argued with him (9-10).

But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

Remember that at this time Jews from all over the world had come to Jerusalem. Many would find their own sections in the city. Some of these ethnic groups formed their own synagogues, including one group Luke identifies as the "The Synagogue of the Freedmen." These men were descendants of Jewish slaves that had been captured by Pompey in 63 B.C and taken to Rome. Sometime later, they were granted their freedom. They came from different Hellenistic areas around Rome and Greece. Luke also mentions Jews from Cyrene—a key city in north Africa or modern day Libya; and there were also Jews from Alexandria, another key city in north Africa and the second most important city in the Roman Empire next to Rome itself. Alexandria boasted a large Jewish population. Also mentioned are Jews from the provinces of Cilicia and Asia, areas of modern day Turkey. The point is that Jews from all different cultures and traditions had gathered in Jerusalem.

And in the midst of all this, remember that Paul's hometown was Tarsus which was located in Cilicia (Acts 21:39; 22:3). And so, while in Jerusalem, he probably attended this very synagogue. It makes me wonder; did Stephen actually go to Paul's synagogue to evangelize? It is entirely possible.

We do know that Stephen went to this Synagogue of the Freedmen and preached. How did the men respond? They argued with him. The Greek verb *suzeteo* refers not to a quarrel, but to a formal debate. While we do not know the specifics from our text, I think we can rightly assume, as based on what Stephen says in Acts 7, that the argument was about the Messiah Jesus. Stephen preached the gospel, telling these men that Jesus died for sinners, rose again, and that Jesus could do what the Mosaic Law and all the temple rites could not do; that is to save them from their sins. Faith in the merits, the work, and the blood of Christ alone is what brings forgiveness with God; that makes us fit for heaven; that gives us the hope of eternal life. If you desire to experience God's forgiveness, if you desire to become part of God's family, if you desire to spend eternity in paradise with your Maker, there is only one way. You must receive Jesus as your Messiah, as your Savior and Lord. This was Stephen's message and no one could cope, or match his wisdom. And when people cannot win an argument through logic and reason, they look for less reasonable ways to shut up the opponent, and this brings us to the second way in which Stephen experienced the same things Jesus did...

2. The people attacked him (11).

Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

This is just what happened to Jesus. In Matthew 26:59-61 we read,

59 Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put Him to death. 60 They did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward. But later on two came forward, 61 and said, "This man stated, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.'"

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The chief priests were hoping that the principle of, “If you tell a lie long enough, people start to believe it as truth” would take hold. And in a similar way, since the men could not beat Stephen with the truth, they used a lie. They brought some shady characters in to attack him by means of two accusations; 1) blasphemy against Moses; and 2) blasphemy against God. It is interesting that these men mentioned Moses before God. I see this as intentional as they put the Law up before God. However, these are two heinous crimes for the Jews, the blasphemy of the Law and of God. This is not just a slight misunderstanding. So important are these matters that if these accusations stick, they will cost Stephen his life. This was an all out attack on Stephen’s life. This brings us to the third thing the people did...

3. The people arrested him (12).

And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council.

Again, this is the very thing that happened to Jesus. Jesus had done nothing wrong, had lived an exemplary life before the people, having taught them to love God with all their being. And yet, for this, He was arrested by jealous, self-righteous religious leaders. And, as is evident in our current political climate, crowds are fickle. At one moment a person is admired and loved (5:13) and the next, that same crowd will believe a lie and turn against you. On one day the crowds cried out to Jesus, “Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” And then a few days later we read that same crowd cry out, “Crucify Him!, Crucify Him! These same mob tactics worked against Stephen. Upon hearing the slanderous accusations, they arrested Stephen. The verb *sunarpazo* means “to seize with violence; to secure with aggressive force.” [Bandito’s love for tortilla chips]. This is a violent arrest. It was uncalled for, for both Jesus and for Stephen, but Jesus did not promise us fairness in this world, only His own presence with us.

Our text does not tell us how long Stephen’s incarceration was before the trial, but at some point he was called to appear before the court, to stand before the Sanhedrin, the same religious leaders that Peter and John stood before and in fact the same group that Jesus Himself had stood before. And while before that court, the men did the fourth and final thing to Stephen in the same manner as they had done with Jesus...

4. The people accused him unjustly (13-14).

They put forward false witnesses who said, “This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”

As we already noted, what the religious leaders attacked Stephen with, they now unjustly accuse him of before the court. They accused him of undermining the temple and the Law of Moses. This was a bogus charge, but somehow they took Stephen’s words and twisted them. To be sure, as Stephen argued from the Old Testament about who Jesus was, he no doubt spoke about the temple, the Law, and Jewish customs. Perhaps, in the same way such charges were brought of Jesus, Stephen he told them what Jesus had said in John 2:19, “**Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.**” We know that the temple Jesus had spoken of was His own body, but His listeners misunderstood Him. In Matthew 26:60-61 we read of this false charge against Jesus, **60 They did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward. But later on two came forward, 61 and said, “This man stated, ‘I am able to**

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destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.” They were accusing Jesus of being a terrorist, seeing to bring down the temple.

They did the same thing with Stephen. To be sure, as the gospel is true, then there was no longer a need for the temple or the sacrificial system. But Stephen did not *attack* these things; he simply explained them. But what really riled up Stephen’s accusers was what we read in verse 14 of our text, **“for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”** The Jews loved their temple and their customs. The problem was that these had become their God.

We must be wary of tradition for tradition sake. Tradition is a powerful thing. It keeps us focused on external things. Stephen gave the people the Word, but they rejected it. Not because it was not, but because it required change. The Word of God will and must change us. The people did not like it and so we find Stephen in trouble, in much the same way that Jesus found Himself in trouble. But not only did Stephen experience the same things Jesus experienced, I see finally...

B. Stephen responded as Jesus responded (15).

And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

[Read 6:15). It is easy to glamorize this scene. Let us not Michael Angeloize this. There was no halo around Stephen’s head. But there was something inspiring, something clearly of God as I have no doubt that whatever was seen was indelibly seared into Saul’s mind and with which he wrestled until he too turned to receive Jesus as his own Master and experienced the indwelling power and enlightening of the presence of the Holy Spirit. In short, when Stephen was wronged, he simply responded as did his Lord Jesus. We see this in two ways...

1. He stood for God.

Stephen did not worry about the consequences of what he proclaimed. Rather, he determined to stand God. This can be difficult to do, especially when you are alone in the crowd, yet Stephen knew something we can easily forget. Stephen was not alone...

2. God stood with him.

As Stephen stood for God, He was aware that God also stood with him. How do we know this? The evidence was so real that even his accusers could see it on his face. He has been with God. Just as Moses’ face shone as he came down from Mount Sinai with the obvious evidence of having been in the presence of God, so too do we find Stephen with such a countenance. Oh that people would see us and know that we have been with God.

It was at this moment that the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these things so (7:1)?” And what follows is one of most incredible recitations of Israel’s history ever given; and it was given all from memory. We will take a look at that in a couple of weeks, but for now, let me remind you that Stephen was a pacesetter! But what does this mean for us today? Let me leave you with two thoughts.

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1. You must give your whole life to God.

Why are we sometimes prone to think that living for Jesus can be a part time thing? A few hours on Sunday, a special project here and there. Yet Jesus does not want just part of your life, but the whole. Have you ever done that, just lived partially for the Lord? Let me put it in stark terms. Husbands, how would you feel if your wife were say, 90% faithful? Would that satisfy you? Beloved, there is no such thing as part-time loyalty to Jesus Christ. Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior or not?

We must seek to give our whole life to God. Everything, every activity, every dream, everything. Be careful not to misuse this however. Too often we will say with our lips, "I have given my whole life to God." Yet we wiggle around what this means by thinking, "I have a whole lifetime to live for God at some point." Or to put it another way, "I have plenty of time to get serious about living for God *later*." Now is the time to live for God, and this is the second application we learn from Stephen's life. Not only must you give your whole life to God. But...

2. You must live wholly for God every day.

If today were the last day you had on earth, how would you live it? Did Stephen know it was to be his last hours? Maybe not, but the life he lived mattered for God. May I say to you that it would be better to live a short life that blazes for God than a long life that fizzles out along the way? May I ask you, have you gone to the coach and asked to start in the game? It is not enough to simply be on the team, play in the game and inspire others to play to their fullest potential as well. Our natural inclination is to coast; to coast into heaven. Let us be unnatural; supernatural and commit to following in Stephen's steps. Will you determine this very moment to live wholly for God every day?

Soli Deo Gloria

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