

OPPOSITION IN THE EARLY CHURCH--Death (6:8-8:1^{8:1a}~~607~~)

Our attention is now turned to one of the seven deacons, Stephen. His very name indicates one of the reasons why he is so important in the early history of the church for his name means crown and he was the first to wear the martyrs crown. Actually the word martyr means witness and his death only proved that he was a faithful witness, it did not make him a martyr. But in the sense in which we use the word today, that is, of one who gives his life for the gospel, Stephen was the first martyr.

Stephen is also important as the connecting link between Peter and Paul, for it is at the end of this section that Paul is first mentioned. Not only historically, but also doctrinally Stephen is the link between Peter and Paul, for in this message he shows the temporary character of the law, a theme which Paul so ably develops later on. His importance, then, is not to be gauged by the brief time he ministers.

I. SYNAGOGUE--STIRRING OF PEOPLE (6:8-7:1)

Stephen is a deacon to whom God gives added responsibility. He not only served tables but he also served the Word in much the same way as the apostles. He did signs and ~~wonders~~ miracles among the people, but ~~the~~ special direction of his ministry must have been toward his own Hellenistic Jews, for those of the synagogue of the Libertines soon rose against him. "The Libertines (Latin libertinus, a freedman or the son of a freedman) were Jews, once slaves of Rome (perhaps descendants of the Jews taken to Rome as captives by Pompey), now set free and settled in Jerusalem and numerous enough to have a synagogue of their own. Scheurer calls a Talmudic myth the statement that there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem. There were many, no doubt, but how many no one knows. . . . Apparently Luke here speaks of five such synagogues in Jerusalem (that of the Libertines, of the Cyrenians, of the Alexandrians, of Cilicia, and of Asia). There ~~were~~ probably were enough Hellenists in Jerusalem to have five such synagogues. But the language of Luke is not clear on this point. He may make only two groups instead of five since he uses the article ton twice" ATR III. 75.

By some means these unbelieving Jews were able to stir up the people and they hailed Stephen before the Sanhedrin. This time a formal charge is made although false accusers had to be brought to do it. The charge is two-fold (vs. 13): (1) Stephen was speaking against the temple and (2) he was changing the law of Moses. Of course what Stephen had said was completely wrested from its setting just as it was in the case of our Lord (cf. John 2:19; 4:21). This kind of charge is even more difficult to answer, but it labelled him a blasphemer (cf. Deut. 13:1-5). As he stood before the sanhedrin the glory of God was reflected in his face and it shone as the face of an angel (cf. Ex. 34:29; 2 Cor. 3:18). And thus like his Master, Stephen is asked "Are these things so?"

II. STEPHEN --SERMON (7:2-53)

The longest sermon in the book of Acts is before us. It is as long as the three of Paul's put together, and it is an able defense, not for Stephen, but for Christ. Actually the name of Jesus is not mentioned although He is referred to once (vs. 52). One also notices the number of variations in this sermon from the record of the Old Testament. Stephen doubtless read the Septuagint translation which did differ in some places from the Hebrew Old Testament. The variations are not contradictions and since they do appear here we may be sure that they are truth. The solution of this problem is such a problem to some actually lies in the doctrine of inspiration. Because certain additional facts appear here does not mean that the Septuagint is inspired, but it does mean that this which is here is.

If we seek a text in Stephen's message it may be summed up in the words of verse 51: "as your fathers did, so do ye." Stephen proves his point by the simple facts of Jewish history, climaxing his words with the present rejection of Jesus. His message begins with a statement concerning the God of glory; it ends with a manifestation of the glory of God (vs. 2 and 55).

The history of Abraham is first cited (vs. 2-8) for he is the one to whom all Jews look. He was also the outstanding man of faith who believed God and simply took Him at His Word. It was to Abraham that the promises were given, the most pertinent one concerning the seed. The promises were received by faith apart from works.

(vs. 9-16).

From Abraham Stephen passes over Issac and Jacob to Joseph. This is perhaps because Joseph is a more perfect type of Christ than the others. He was sold because of envy (cf. Mark 15:10); God was with Him (cf. Acts 10:38; John 3:2); there was a famine which pictures Israel's condition at that time; and it was the second time that Joseph was revealed to his brethren just as it will be at our Lord's second coming that Israel will know Him whom they pierced.

Finally Stephen comes to Moses (vs. 17-38) who was of special concern to him for the charge against him was related to Moses. In the fulness of time Moses was born to be a deliverer of his people from Egypt (cf. Gal. 4:4), but he was rejected of his people just as Jesus Christ was being rejected by those who sat before Stephen. But it was this same Moses who had prophesied concerning Christ who was to come (vs. 37). (The word translated church in vs. 38 should be translated assembly. This is the non-technical use of the word and certainly gives no liberty for thinking that the church was in the Old Testament.)

See the discussion under the Day of Pentecost.

But even after Moses the apostasy continued (vs. 39-53). It was evident even while Moses was on the mount receiving the Law, for the people demanded a golden calf (vs. 41). It was evident in the worship of the hosts of heaven, Moloch and Remphan (vs. 42-43). He speaks then of the tabernacle and of Solomon's temple and at this point answers part of the charge against him. He had been charged with saying things against the temple, but God does not dwell in temples made by men (cf. 1 Kings 8:27; Isa. 66:122). Finally he makes the

application to the present occasion. Ye, he says addressing the Sanhedrin, are the ones who are now rejecting the message of God as your fathers have done in the past. He makes it clear that this is a sin against the Holy Ghost, and he places the blame for the slaying of Christ squarely *at* their doorstep (vs. 52). All of those who have been cited by Stephen in this review of Israel's history have been lonely men--those who have stood for the truth of God in the midst of their unbelieving generations. Just so, Jesus of Nazareth now stands alone who is the final and complete revelation of God. As they rejected the others, they are now rejecting Him.

III. SAUL--STONING (7:54-~~60~~)^{8/a}

As Stephen began to bear down with the truth the members of the council began to murmur and create disorder. Finally the conviction was so great that they interrupted his message and rushed upon him in preparation for the ston~~ing~~. Again we have an example of the man of God using the Word of God in the power of the Spirit of God to bring conviction (cut in the heart is also used in 5:33). So angered were they that they literally gnashed their teeth at him like ravenous beasts, stopped their ears so as not to hear any thing more, cast him out of the city, and stoned him. There was no vote or no concern that ^{the Sanhedrin} they themselves did not have the power of ^{sentencing one to death.} ~~passing a death~~ sentence.

But in it all stands the serene figure of Stephen. He had delivered his soul in his message and now he committed himself unto his Lord. As he looked into heaven he beheld Jesus standing on the right hand of God. This is not the usual position in which the Lord is pictured in heaven, for he is seated. Morgan suggests the reason for this exception:

The two positions suggest the two activities of His Priesthood. He was Priest after the order of Aaron, whose business it was to make Atonement. As such He sits at the right hand of God, because His work is accomplished. But He was also a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

When Abraham was returning from conflict, Melchizedek brought forth bread and wine. Melchizedek was a priest of God who ministered to the failing strength of the warrior of faith. Stephen saw the heaven opened, and the glory of God, and the great Archetype doing Melchizedek's work, standing and ministering. Because a member of His Body was in pain and suffering, He stood to minister to him in the hour of his agony.

Morgan, p. 184.

Then, as they were stoning him he kneeled and prayed to the Lord (one of the very rare ~~instant~~ examples of a prayer addressed directly to the second Person of the Trinity), ^{offering} ~~in~~ two petitions. One concerned himself: "receive my spirit." The other concerned those who were stoning him: "lay not this sin to their charge." (cf. Luke 23:34). Then he fell asleep and went immediately into the presence of his Saviour. Stephen had entered into the rest concerning which he had spoken to the raging and violent Sanhedrin.

But the story does not end there. We need the first part of the first verse of the next chapter in order to make it complete. Stephen is dead, but God's truth lives on~~d~~ and will soon bear fruit in the life of the man Saul. Out of Stephen comes Saul who at this moment was standing by holding the clothes and consenting to the death (Acts 22:20; Rom. 1:32). It should be an encouragement to realize afresh that even out of tragedy God's purposes are advanced. So it was ^{in the case} ~~with~~ the first Christian martyr.