



“Stephen...and the Apostles”

Acts 6:1–15; Acts 7:51–8:1a (NRSV)

***When our faith is tested, how do we respond?
With boldness and love?***

Imagine someone seeing something of Jesus in you, perhaps even a lot of “something.” Luke takes great pains to help us grasp that Stephen gets into trouble precisely because he is so much like Jesus in his ministry, his “exceptional endowment with divine power” and “doing great wonders and signs” (6:8). And Stephen would be like Jesus in his death, ever faithful and obedient.

The community grows

The early chapters of Acts focus on life in the emerging community of Jesus-believers in Jerusalem in the months and years after the Holy Spirit arrived during the festival of Pentecost after Jesus’ resurrection. The community grows and thrives as the city hears the Good News and sees stark evidence of God’s creative power among them. But, not too surprisingly, problems begin to emerge.

That says nothing about their faith, only that they still had to deal with their own sinful hearts. For example, in Acts 5 a man and his wife lie to the apostles—to God—falsely claiming that they had turned over all the proceeds from a property sale. They hadn’t and when confronted with their lies, they both drop dead.

Now, a more significant problem has emerged that threatens the community’s unity, which is comprised of both Greek-speaking disciples (referred to as the “Hellenists” in most translations) and Aramaic-speaking disciples (the “Hebrews”). In other words, there were disciples even then who were originally from elsewhere in the Roman Empire. As we all know, desiring unity and living unity are not the same. The Greek-speaking widows believe that their needs are not being met for the sake of the Aramaic-speaking widows. The nature of the problem is well laid-out by N.T. Wright:

The problem came to a head over the treatment of widows. This shows that already in the early church the question of ‘living as a single family’ had clear negative as well as positive implications: normally, widows would be taken care of among their own blood-relations, but those family ties appear to have been cut when people joined the new movement. As in some parts of the world to this day, baptism meant saying goodbye to an existing family as well as being welcomed into a new one. And the new one therefore had to take on the obligations of the old...

Whatever we think about that, the distinction in verse 1 between ‘Hellenists’ and ‘Hebrews’ is probably one of those things with a variety of elements mixed together. Nobody had planned for a complex and intricate welfare system. It had been invented on the hoof, when there were other things (such as persecution by the authorities) to think about. It would be surprising if such a system could proceed without difficulties. And in a complex society such as that in Jerusalem, which was both a deeply traditional culture, very conscious of its historic and religious significance, and a cosmopolitan mixture of Jews from all over the world, it is not surprising that people would be eyeing one another to see if this or that group appeared to be taking advantage.¹

With the food distribution system having broken down, the apostles realize that they are going to need some reorganization of structure and duties. Who will do what and how will the needs of all be effectively and justly met? So the apostles call a meeting of all the believers in Jerusalem. They outline the problem and ask the community to select seven men, to whom the apostles would delegate the food distribution (*diakonein*) and assuredly other responsibilities. The community would select the seven, but the apostles set forth two criteria. They must be well-respected and it must be clear to all that the men have been endowed by the Holy Spirit with exceptional wisdom.

Seven men were chosen; their names are listed in Acts 6:5. In front of the community, the apostles pray over the seven and lay their hands on them, which denoted a sharing of the apostles’ authoritative power. The

¹ Wright, N.T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (p. 98). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

apostles were ensuring that as they delegated responsibility, they also gave these men authority. The apostles would continue to serve but would now focus on prayer and the proclamation of the Gospel.

A target

Stephen is listed first among and his gifts are noted. Surely that is no accident. It becomes clear that there is, indeed, something special about Stephen. Enough so that opposition to him rose and, soon, made him a target of the Jewish leadership and the crowds. Eventually, Stephen is hauled before the Jewish Council where he is confronted by false testimony. There's a remarkable moment in 6:15: as Stephen is lied about, his face is radiant, "just like an angel's."

When Stephen speaks in his own defense against the accusations of blasphemy, he delivers a blistering indictment not only of the Jewish leadership but of his fellow Jews in general. Stephen takes the council through the long sad story of the Jews and their unwillingness to see God's work among them. If you ever want a quick run through of the Old Testament story just turn to Acts 7. It is certainly one of the most important speeches in Acts. Robert Wall helps us to look a bit deeper into Stephen's speech.

Speeches in Acts typically respond to a theological mistake. Stephen's is no exception: The question, "Are these things so?" is asked by a hostile court in consideration of "false" testimony (see above). On the face of it, however, Stephen's speech is hardly an apologia in either form or motive; nowhere does he directly respond to the charges brought against him. Nor is his speech kerygmatic,² since nowhere does he draw together biblical passages in support of the church's proclamation that the risen Jesus is God's promised Messiah. Rather, he tells a story of unrepentant Israel. Johnson reminds us that similar prophetic recitals of Israel's history were commonplace within biblical and contemporary Jewish literature. The manner of the storyteller's retelling of that sacred history—what is included or omitted and in what sequence—presents a particular line of vision into Israel's faith and destiny. Apart from its brevity, the principal literary convention that distinguishes this historiography from secular counterparts (e.g., Herodotus, Thucydides, Josephus) is its biblical diction and citation: Stephen's speech is midrashic—that is, he retells Israel's history by recalling a selection of biblical stories that carry his theological freight—a prophet's exposure of Israel's need for repentance and restoration. He only indirectly responds to the charges leveled against him as an element of this theological perspective, and the central themes of his speech are those of a pious Jew who would never blaspheme God or Moses (see 6:11).³

Needless to say, the speech does not go over well. Stephen's fellow Jews become enraged and haul him outside to be stoned to death. Wall again:

"While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed" (7:59 NIV). The manner of Stephen's death is exemplary of his costly obedience. His inspired vision of the exalted Lord, glossed by his faithful confession and earnest prayers at the very moment of his martyrdom, expresses a genuine piety. Yet the most compelling evidence of the depth of Stephen's spiritual life is the content of his prayers. Similar to Jesus' dying words, Stephen prays for the forgiveness of his enemies at the very moment of their apparent triumph over him and his witness. He does not ridicule his executioners, nor does he express regret for his untimely death. He prays for their salvation: It is what and for whom he prays, and not that he prays, that gives his death its most profound meaning.⁴

This series is titled, *Supporting Actors*. It is easy to see that Stephen was supporting the apostles, taking on the work of caring for the poor. But Stephen was also supporting the work of Christ, boldly proclaiming Israel's dire need for salvation and witnessing, even in death, to Christ's love.

² "Kerygmatic" is from the Greek word, *kerygma*, meaning "proclamation" or "preaching" and refers to proclaiming a message. In the New Testament, this kerygma is the Good News about Jesus.

³ Wall, R. W. (1994–2004). The Acts of the Apostles. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 10, p. 124). Nashville: Abingdon Press

⁴ Ibid.