

Stephen is a distinguished member of the community, a man who lives like righteous Jewish men have lived over millennium: Stephen knows his Scripture, Stephen worships God alone, and Stephen attends Synagogue and Stephen obeys the law of Moses.

Stephen is just like many righteous Jewish men who live in the city of Jerusalem except for one thing: It has dawned on Stephen that the sacrifices offered at the Temple in Jerusalem are no longer needed. There is no need to continually offer sacrifice for our sin at the Temple because Jesus Christ is our atoning sacrifice for sins of the past, He is the atoning sacrifice for sins of the here and now, and He is the atoning sacrifice for sins of the future.

The only thing needed to cover the wrong we have done was the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Being good doesn't remove my wrong doing. Doing the right things doesn't remove my wrong doing. Living my life the best I can does not remove the things I have done wrong in my life. Neither does giving all I have away to the poor, or being kind and considerate to all I know remove my sin. Even if I love everyone I meet, make the world a better place, eliminate poverty, end war, or even bring healing and joy to millions of people - no amount of self sacrifice, phenomenal success, good character or good intentions will remove any of the bad things I have done, correct any sin or offer me any forgiveness. The only thing needed to cover the wrong we have done was the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - Period.

Good karma, bad karma; positive thoughts, negative thoughts; good intentions, poor intentions - these all are irrelevant, they cannot bring any forgiveness into my life, and get this: Even if I perfectly keep the ten commandments, that is not enough, what I need in my life is Jesus Christ.

When we boil this whole chapter down to its main point we see the same issue for us today as it was for the folks we see in the ancient world: Is it Jesus blood that covers our sin and bring redemption to us, or is it something else that takes away our sin and brings us redemption? Is it Jesus or is it something else.

Remember, we saw back in chapter 4, the Apostle Peter clearly say: (Acts 4:12) "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

We saw that Peter made no bones about it. We saw that no matter how you slice it, no matter how you dice it, that is the correct and accurate translation: The only name in which we can be saved is in the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

The central issue in our text today is parallel in our time as it was in their time. It the time of these new believers, Judaism is confronted with a very practical fact: Is it Jesus and the Temple, or is it Jesus alone? In our time it is the same. Is it Jesus, AND some other thing, or, is it Jesus alone?

Up to this point, everyone sees those who believe in Jesus as another religious movement within Judaism. Believers in Jesus are held in high regard. Jesus was a good Jewish man, and his followers are very loving and generous and get along with everyone. See, the new believers, and there are an estimated 25,000 believers at this point, the new believers, who are all Jewish, follow all the Jewish laws and customs. To everyone in Jerusalem, believers in Jesus are just as Jewish as they are, except, they follow the teachings of Jesus.

And then something hits Stephen.

Stephen realizes this: Why are we continuing to offer sacrifice when Jesus was the one sacrifice needed for all time? Stephen realizes that we do not need the Temple to atone for our sin, because we now have Jesus, therefore, no one needs to offer sacrifice at the Temple anymore.

Notice: Stephen doesn't claim that only believers shouldn't offer sacrifice anymore, Stephen claims this idea is for everyone. In other words, he is not saying, "This is what I believe, it is my personal belief - I'll live my life the way I want, and you live your life the way you want." No, Stephen argues: This is how it is, no ifs ands or buts.

Stephen argues very well and life for the new believers is never the same.....

Who was Stephen?

The name Stephen means "garland" like what was placed on the heads of the victors at the ancient Olympic games. Stephen, we see is at the beginning of the list there in verse 5. This isn't random. This shows that Stephen is the most favored of the seven men chosen. He is known to be full of faith and the Holy Spirit. This tells us that Stephen not

only had the Holy Spirit, as all believers do, but Stephen was able to hear and obey the Holy Spirit well. Stephen is a strong believer.

Stephen is one of the leaders of the believers who are Hellenistic Jews. Hellenistic Jews are Jews who spoke Greek and attended a synagogue conducted in Greek. Most were not originally from Palestine. They had immigrated from another part of the Roman Empire. At some point in time they themselves or their ancestors had immigrated to another part of the Roman Empire usually quite unwillingly. While these Hellenistic Jews lived outside of Palestine they not only picked up the Greek language, but they tended to also pick up some of the local customs as well.

While Stephen was a Hellenistic Jew, there were also Aramaic speaking Jews. The Aramaic speaking Jews attended a synagogue where the service was conducted in Hebrew. These were Palestinian Jews who were born in Palestine, they were the locals. Jesus, the twelve disciples, the pharisees, these were Aramaic Speaking Jews.

We see at the beginning of the chapter that the widows who were Hellenistic Jews (NIV Grecian) were being overlooked. Now there was a cultural tension between the Hellenistic Jews and Aramaic speaking Jews, but most likely the widows were overlooked not because of any animosity, but simply because there were many more Aramaic speaking Jews than there were Hellenistic Jews.

We see that Stephen is chosen as one to place this situation in order. The men picked are of honorable reputation so that they could be completely trusted. They are most likely recognized leaders in the Hellenist side of the church. All the men chosen are Hellenists. Though in verse two we see the disciples saying that they don't want to wait on tables, don't take it that these men waited on tables like a waiter in a restaurant. Instead these men would have handed out money to the widows which would then be used to purchase food or whatever they needed. The sense here isn't domestic duties, but more along the lines of administration. These men are the best of the best of those who are Greek speaking Jewish believers.

The Apostles lay hands upon the seven men and pray for them. Laying on of hands is not a magical transfer of power. Don't imagine that some sort of power flows from the Apostles to these men - that's not how it works in Christianity. We NEVER receive power

from another human by the laying on of hands. We only receive power directly from the Holy Spirit, and no other source.

I was at a church seminar a few years ago, and at the end of the day, the speaker wanted to lay hands on each of us and pray for us. That sounds fairly normal. But then, he announced that we each would receive power from him as he lay hands on us. To my surprise I was the only one who refused. When he asked me why I refused, I asked him to show me a biblical example specifically where power was transferred from a human to a human by the laying on of hands. He could give no answer.

You see biblically we receive power from the Holy Spirit - period. End of story. Anyone who tells you otherwise is misinformed. These seven men have the Holy Spirit, in fact Stephen is known to be full of the Holy Spirit, they have the power they need. Here, the laying on of hands it is a sign of discharging responsibility from one to another. It is a sign of giving authority. It is a practice found throughout the OT where it is a physical sign of discharging responsibility.

Looking at verse 8, we see that Stephen is quite a remarkable figure. Though it doesn't exactly specify what "great wonders and miraculous signs" are, we can be assured that Stephen wasn't playing parlor games. We pretty much can assume it was along the lines of what was happening with the Apostles.

Note that in verse 7 even many priests were becoming believers. These men would not relinquish their office as priest - they are still Jewish, they just now believe that Jesus is the messiah.

Even as many of the new believers are priests, Stephen is discussing among others things the continuing validity of the Temple. This is a natural outgrowth of the Christian message and because the Hellenists are one step removed from Hebrew culture, they are the ones who realized that the Temple had become superfluous.

So opposition rises from a synagogue, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen. This was a Hellenistic synagogue composed of Hellenistic Jews who were once Roman slaves, but were now freemen. It is apparent that Stephen is traveling around and speaking in the Hellenistic circles of Greek speaking Jews and so the challenge to him comes from Hellenistic Jews.

The synagogue was always the place to meet for religious debate, so here Stephen debates. The synagogue Stephen is speaking at here has been identified as the Ophel synagogue discovered by archeologists in 1913. Stephen's teaching had aroused opposition, so apparently a full blown debate was arranged to meet in the synagogue. Stephen speaks well and wins the debate, but winning the debate does not persuade his opponents to believe.

So what we see here in chapter 6 is not the Christian church pitted against Judaism, nor is it Judaism against The Christian Church, this is Jewish men discussing with other Jewish men how Judaism should be carried out from this time forward. The question they are dealing with is: Do we need the Temple and the Traditions to continue follow the Lord God or are the Temple and the Traditions superfluous?

These men cannot win the debate, so they decide to have Stephen removed. These men at the synagogue are powerless themselves, so they stir up the authorities, saying what needed to be said to have him arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. You will remember, the Sanhedrin is the same group of men that Jesus was brought before, and most recently, this is the same group of men whom Peter was brought before. You may also remember that Peter spoke so well that the Sanhedrin had no answer and had to let Peter go.

This council dealt with Jesus, sentencing him to death, believing that their problem would be done with. Then we saw in chapter 4, that they dealt with Peter and John, where they warned the two Apostles not to speak about Jesus, again they hoped the problem would go away - and now the problem is back again with Stephen standing before them with the same charge that was thrown at Jesus. Threatened destruction of the Temple.

We are not told the substance of the debate, but the testimony against Stephen reveals the content of Stephen's argument. They claim blasphemy - the same charge that was leveled against Jesus. Verses 13-14 tell us what made some folks very upset, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

Jesus does in fact say this: Mark 14:58 "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man.'" And again in Luke 21:6

“As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.”

Now the reason they push for the profanation of the temple is that the Roman administration expressly reserved the jurisdiction of this to the Jewish Authorities. If it was a matter of temple desecration or threatened temple desecration, the Romans let the Jews deal with it. So then by claiming desecration of the Temple Stephen can be taken care of with Roman intervention.

In reality, Stephen is not advocating the destruction of the Temple, but Stephen is questioning its redundancy - Jesus the Messiah died and rose again as the final and absolute sacrifice. Stephen argues, that since this is true, the sacrifice at the Temple is no longer needed. Stephen is claiming that Jesus is greater than the temple, again, something Jesus himself claimed Matthew 12:6, “I tell you that one greater than the temple is here.”

Another way to put it is that Stephen held that the coming of the messiah (Jesus) meant the end of sacrificial cultus and ceremonial law. As his fellow hellenists saw, these were an outward sign of Jewish particularism and could not be reconciled with the wider scope of the salvation accomplished by Jesus.

In plain English: We don't need anything other than Jesus.

This is very threatening. Why?

See men and women would come from all over the world to offer sacrifice to the Lord God. Then once a year the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies, the innermost section of the Temple to offer a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people for the past year.

The Temple brought in a Tremendous amount of \$\$ into the city of Jerusalem. Jews from all over the world would make trips to Jerusalem specifically because of the Temple. To undermine the Temple would be to undermine the livelihood of many in Jerusalem who were not even connected to the Temple.

Even more, the Pharisaic oral law which had developed over many years would be void if Stephen was right. The oral law was an interpretation of the Scriptures, it was put in place so people could better understand the Bible.

Here is where it all comes together. Earlier the Sanhedrin had Peter and John stand before them and claim that Jesus was the only way to salvation, they didn't know what to say. Now they have Stephen brought before them, and the difference is that Christianity is no longer just a theological concept, Christianity means we live our lives differently.

In Stephen's day that meant not going to the Temple - and the implication is, leaving Judaism altogether.

In our day, it means that we who are Christians follow Jesus - and that means we follow Jesus and not other means of salvation, other means of forgiveness, other means of regeneration.

Plainly speaking that means I do not participate in the worship of other religions. I do not go to prayers at the Islamic Mosque: I do not participate in offerings at the Hindu Temple and I do not join in on prayers at the Buddhist Temple - Why? Because Jesus is all we need, Jesus brings us salvation, he brings us forgiveness, he brings us the Holy Spirit - these other religions cannot do that.

Now, some of you are thinking, "That sure sounds bigoted"

That is exactly what Stephen's opponents thought. It was an offense and unpopular thing to say then, and it is an offensive and unpopular thing to say now. Notice that Stephen doesn't use the lame argument that this is truth for me, and you have your own truth. No, Stephen lays it out how it is - Jesus is the only way - the clear implication is - there is no other way.

See, up to this point in the early Christian church, the believers looked and acted like everyone else, there was no real reason to not like Christians. But when Christianity claims that it is right - then people get all riled up.

Let me end with this:

For us, we should not be surprised when people react to the Christian message negatively, people have always done this. But we should not fear that negativity towards the Gospel will harm the mission of the church. For here begins the persecution of the church, here begins the formation of negative views toward Christianity, and here begins the vast spread of the Gospel, for the Gospel can overcome anything.

The fact is any honest Moslem, Hindu or Buddhist will claim that their religion is the only way that there is, it is a myth that Christians are alone in claiming that Jesus is the only way and it is a myth that Christianity is bigoted for claiming that Jesus is the only way.

The truth is, we are in the same situation that Stephen was so many years ago, and the question we need to answer in our lives is this: Is it Jesus alone, or is it Jesus and something more?