

Acts Chapter 7

Stephen, the Law and the Temple

The scene has suddenly changed from internal tensions to external danger, as Stephen is hauled before the Sanhedrin to give a defence of his actions. It is important to notice the specific charges which are brought against Stephen:

that he speaks "against this holy place and the law" (v. 13). (The "holy place" is a reference to the Jerusalem Temple, and the "law" is a reference to the Old Testament law) .

It's with these accusations in mind that Stephen now launches into his defence.

Read Acts 7

Questions for discussions

- Why do you think Stephen recounts so much of the Old Testament in his speech?
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- Stephen has been accused of being against the Temple. What does Stephen say about the temple in verses 44-50?

In what way is this a defence against the accusations?

- Stephen has been accused of being against Moses. What does Stephen say about Moses in verses 35-39?
In what way is this a defence against the accusations?

- What most annoys the Sanhedrin in Stephen's speech?

- What do you think Stephen means in verse 56?

- What finally happens to Stephen? How does that make you feel ?

- Stephen's death was illegal (see John 18:31). What does this reveal about the desperation of the Sanhedrin?

- How is Stephen's death and Saul's mission an example of God using evil to fulfil God's plan (1:8)

- This begins phase 2 (“Judea and Samaria) of God’s plan (see 1:8). How would you sum up the “Jerusalem phase”) Chapter 2-7
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The church’s first martyr

The escalating hostility which we have noted in Acts has finally exploded. The blood of the church’s first martyr now runs in the streets of Jerusalem. It is a tragic and brutal moment in the history of the early church. Yet even through the tragedy, we discover important things about the ongoing work of the risen Christ. Two particular truths deserve mention:

a) The divisiveness of Christ

How do you explain Luke 12:51-53 in the light of what is happening to Stephen and the Church of Christ.?

Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

b) The continuity of Christ

Stephen’s speech is the longest speech in Acts. We can get a bit lost in such a long speech, but the main point is simple enough. Stephen is keen to show that the coming of Jesus is in complete continuity with the Old Testament.

The specific charges made against Stephen were that he opposed the Temple and the Old Testament law. Stephen argues that it is the Sanhedrin who have got things all out of proportion. With regards to the Temple, Stephen points out that God worked unhindered without a temple for many years (7:2-43), and that when a temple did finally come along it was at David’s, and not God’s, initiative (7:46); nor was

God in a hurry to build it, since it was delayed until Solomon's reign (7:47). Indeed, when it finally was built, God declared the Temple inadequate and only a symbol of his dwelling (7:48-50). The implication is clear. The Sanhedrin think that Stephen has it wrong about the Temple, but Stephen argues that they are the ones who need to go back and read their Old Testament! The Temple is not nearly as significant as they think.

The other main accusation against Stephen was that he was anti-Moses and the Law. It's in defending this charge that Stephen most angers the Sanhedrin. Stephen recounts the events of the Old Testament, and points out that it is the Sanhedrin who come from a long line of ancestors who reject God (e.g. 7:9, 25-27, 34-35, 39- 43). Just in case the speech has been a little too subtle for the Sanhedrin, Stephen closes off by saying:

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it (Acts 7:51-53).

Stephen's point is now pretty obvious. The Sanhedrin have accused him of being against the Temple and God's law; however it is they themselves who are wrong about the Temple, and disobedient to the workings of God. Far from being in contradiction to the Old Testament, Jesus the risen Christ is the climax of the Old Testament.

Stephen's Death (7:57—60)

With dramatic crispness Luke describes how the angry audience acts in haste to put Stephen to death. When they add these words about the vision of Jesus to his damaging statements about the temple, they have no choice but to kill him for blasphemy—just as they had killed Jesus. Their covering of their ears (7:57) must have been a characteristic response to blasphemy. They wish "to shut out his words lest God come and consume them for listening to such blasphemy." Stephen is dragged out of the city for stoning (7:58a) in keeping with the command to "take the blasphemer outside the camp ... and ... stone him" (Lev. 24:14). Luke mentions Saul at this point.