

TAKE A STAND ... LIKE STEPHEN!

What are some ways you can think of concerning how people express opposition to something or someone they think is wrong? Well...

Sometimes they'll just speak out against it, trying to prove it's false.

Sometimes they'll attack the character of the messenger in order to minimize the credibility of his message. And...

Sometimes they'll use their influence to weaken the strength of the message.

What about you? Have you been opposed recently, especially by your own physical or spiritual family members? If so, how did you respond? **LET'S CONSIDER HOW STEPHEN OF ACTS 6:8—8:1 RESPONDED.**

LET'S READ AND REMARK ON THE PASSAGE.

Let's first read and remark on Acts 6:8-14.

This passage refers to "the council."

This council was also known as the Sanhedrin, the court of Jewish justice.

The Sanhedrin was comprised of 70 Jewish leaders (also known as elders) from both the Pharisee and the Sadducee parties. So...

A group of Jews dragged Stephen before the Sanhedrin, accusing him of speaking against the Law of Moses and the Temple.

Were these charges true? What did Luke record? Well, much like in the case of Jesus, we find that these were false accusations by false witnesses who were secretly persuaded to lie. See...

They wanted the Sanhedrin in opposition against Stephen just as it was already at odds against the apostles (Acts 5:17-18). So how did Stephen respond? Well...

Let's read and remark on Acts 7:2-53.

Now..., what pattern in Jewish history did Stephen trace through Joseph, Moses, and Jesus? Or what was similar about these men and their experiences with the Jews? Well...

They were all *sent* by God.

They were all *saviors* of God's people. And...

They were all *snubbed* by God's people.

In both the law of Moses (vv. 39-41) and the prophets (vv. 42-43), the Jews were condemned for worshipping idols. How was this fact relevant to the way the Jews treated the Temple? Well...

The Jews rejoiced in the beauty of the Temple, the work of their own hands.

They boasted that God dwelt in the Temple, somewhat like the heathen who claimed that their god dwelt in their images.

Their reverence for the Temple was too extreme, placing more value on the building than on the God it was built to honor.

The Jews thought their Temple in the Holy City of Jerusalem was the holiest place on Earth, the center of God's dealings with His people. So how did Stephen's account of Israel's history subtly explode that myth? Well...

The Temple was important to the Jew because God was believed to dwell there. But...

In verses 2, 9, & 30-34, Stephen proved that God is not confined to one location, so God didn't personally indwell the Temple.

What did Stephen imply was wrong with the Jews' attitude toward the Temple in verses 48-50?

They had placed too much emphasis on the temple as the dwelling place of God.

In a sense, they had 'captured' their God in a stone building like the pagan had his god in a stone idol. So, in the mind of the Jew...

To speak of the destruction of the Temple was to speak against God. However...

Stephen proved from the Scriptures that the Temple could not contain God (Isa. 66:1-2).

Now that we've looked at Stephen's speech in some detail, let's answer the High Priest's question in verse 1: "Are these things so?" In other words, are these accusations true, Stephen?

What were Stephen's beliefs about Moses and the Law?

Stephen quoted from Moses in a way so as to demonstrate respect for Moses as a prophet of God and as an instrument for Israel's redemption (vv. 35-39).

He also emphasized the importance of obedience to the Law (which his hearers were themselves guilty of disobeying, v. 53); in fact, he called the Law "the living oracles" (v. 38) to express his high regard for it as God's Word.

What was Stephen's belief about the Temple?

He spoke about the forerunner of the Temple as being built according to God's own blueprints, calling it "the tabernacle of witness" (v. 44), meaning it contained the Law of God.

He then spoke about Temple that Solomon built for God. So...

Stephen expressed a proper respect for the Temple, not one too low or too high. But...

Stephen didn't just answer the charges against him, he also responded with charges of his own. What were his accusations that roused the Jews to fury?

He called them "stiff necked [stubborn] and uncircumcised in heart and ears" (v. 51).

Circumcision was a sign that the Jews were God's people, so to be uncircumcised was a disgrace to a Jew. Figuratively speaking...

Circumcision symbolized the cutting away of pride and sinfulness from one's heart (Lev. 26:41, Deu. 10:16, & Jer. 4:4).

Stephen's point was that physical circumcision did no good if one's heart was full of sin and pride; in God's eyes, they were still uncircumcised, an accusation that infuriated the Jews.

He also said they resisted the Holy Spirit (v. 51). They fought against the Spirit by refusing to receive His message, imitating their forefathers in at least two ways:

1. They killed Jesus, the greatest of prophets (v. 52). (A prophet is the mouthpiece of the Spirit, so to kill a prophet was to resist the message of the Spirit.) And...
2. They refused to obey the Law which was delivered through the Spirit (v. 53).

How were the Jews disobeying the very Law they claimed to uphold? Well...

The Law forbade idolatry, yet their extreme reverence for the Temple was idolatrous.

The Law forbade murder, yet they murdered Jesus.

The Law forbade false witnessing, yet they were used against Jesus and Stephen.

Their beloved Moses foretold of a Prophet like himself Who God would send to the Jews, and they were to obey that Prophet as they had honored Moses, but when Jesus came in fulfillment of that prophecy, the Jews refused to obey Him, thereby rejecting their beloved Moses as well.

Now that we've read and remarked on Acts chapter seven...

LET'S REALIZE THE PRINCIPLE.

The young church experienced tremendous growth and unity. At first their success seemed limitless. But soon they were tested severely. Stephen, a young leader in the church, was arrested on false accusations and brought before the Sanhedrin. There he confronted the religious leaders with their sin and hypocrisy. Responding with rage, the religious leaders condemned and executed Stephen on the spot.

The church today, in existence for nearly 2,000 years now, seems to grow complacent and powerless during these times of prosperity and freedom. We seem afraid to speak the truth, holding tightly to our prestige and position in society. Stephen courageously spoke up and lost his life for it. Now...

What are we willing to risk or lose for Christ? On what position do we see that we need to take a stand?

What might cause religious leaders to try to silence Christians who speak the truth?

1. The desire to retain power.

Christianity was a threat to the power and influence of the Jewish leaders: many were turning away from them to follow Jesus.

A power-hungry leader may do anything to maintain his position of influence and prestige.

If the truth is harmful to him, he'll silence the messenger.

2. If the truth goes against their agenda: most leaders have a philosophy and goals to accomplish, so if the truth explodes their philosophy or thwarts their agenda, they'll persecute the Christian who speaks the truth.
3. Love for the praise of men. The reward of leadership to some men is the respect and good reputation that comes from their high position. So...

If the messenger reveals that the leader is in fact a hypocrite who has rejected God's Word, the leader's reputation is tarnished.

To regain the praise of men, some men have tried to discount the message and defame the reputation of the messenger. Now...

In what ways is Stephen a good model for us to follow?

1. He, like John the Baptist, was *not* intimidated by the rank of his opponents.

Some people will stand for the truth ... until they have to face a Goliath.

Stephen believed that no man was above the truth, just as *no* king or president is *supposed* to be above the law.

Stephen's stand reminds me of the preacher who was invited to a "religious breakfast" by President Clinton just a few days after Clinton had signed a bill authorizing partial-birth abortions.

The President was greeting his guests, and when it was this man's turn, he shook Clinton's hand and leaned forward and whispered, "God will hold you responsible"; the President was visibly shaken.

Soon the man was arrested by secret service agents, but he was soon released for lack of grounds for the arrest.

He was not intimidated by Clinton's rank. Here was a Stephen!

2. Stephen was *not* afraid of debate.

In our society, tolerance is popular: "Agree to disagree, agreeably," is the motto.

Debate is considered divisive, dishonorable, and pushy. After all, "What right do you have to push your beliefs on others?"

Some Christians believe this line: "Standing up for truth and right is out, and tolerance is in," and they want to be "in."

Stephen, however, believed that truth is more important than tolerance.

Convincing others to be right with God was of greater value than being liked by others. So...

He would stand for the truth and not back down. And...

3. Stephen was in the truest sense ... "committed."

We say that one who is determined is "committed." But where does commitment come from? The word "commit" means "to give over." So...

The committed person has given over every part of his life to Christ, and Stephen did so even to the point of death (cf. Rev. 2:10); he was left holding nothing but the Cause of Christ.

Such a person will expend all his energies for the Lord, being willing to give his life for Christ if necessary.

Stephen was truly committed. Some Christians appear to be determined, but are in fact uncommitted. Stephen demonstrated for us what true commitment is. Next...

LET'S RESPOND TO THE MESSAGE.

When are we likely to be quiet even though we know we should speak up?

Is it when speaking up may cost us our jobs?

Is it when speaking up may cause people we respect to have a negative opinion of us?

Is it when speaking up may cause problems in our marriages or families?

Is it when speaking up may cause us to be sued?

Is it when speaking up may give us or the church bad press in the news media?

Is it when speaking up may land us in prison?

Is it when speaking up may result in our deaths or the deaths of those we love?

Who needs to be confronted about his or her wrong beliefs or actions? Jesus taught that any child of God who sins should be approached (Matthew 18:15-17) and not just by the preacher. Lastly...

LET'S RESOLVE TO BE A STEPHEN AND TAKE ACTION.

Are we willing to risk persecution to proclaim and live the truth?

What could we do this week to speak up for the truth or to speak out against evil around us?

Like Stephen, those willing to take a stand for truth will be opposed; the key to winning is expecting and being prepared for those times.

What was the result of Stephen's loss of life for truth? Well, it was great. Consider what Jesus said about one man's sacrifice: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it produces much grain" (John 12:24), exactly what happened because of Stephen's death. Read Acts 7:54—8:1 & 4.

There was Philip's evangelistic tour (8:4-40).

There was Paul's conversion (9:1-30).

There was Peter's missionary tour (9:32—11:18). And...

There was the planting of the churches in Antioch and Syria (11:19ff). So...

Take heart struggling Christian! The fruit of one person's sacrifice may long outlive him!