

Intro: The response to gospel persuasion and preaching is one of three things, as noted in Acts 5, is fear, faith, or fury. At the end of chapter 6 and into chapter 8 we see the response of fury by those who are convicted by the gospel but whom refuse to submit to its truth that Jesus is the Christ. We are given an example in the man, Stephen, of what it means to be certain that Jesus is the Christ and stand in the face of coercion with hope, courage, and faith. And, in the end, He beheld the glory of Christ Jesus, standing to receive him. With eyes fully fixed on Him, he stood his ground, received his portion in the sufferings of Christ, and then received the eternal weight of glory made suitable by the Christ who holds the power to do so.

If we want to be full of the Spirit and wisdom, we must fix our eyes on Jesus, bury ourselves in God’s Word of Him, and fertilize our hearts with the dependence of prayer which wrought more things than this world dreams of. Because, in the end, we have a King who stands to receive our bloodied and scarred souls and bodies with an invitation, “enter into the joy of your Master.” Therefore, we seek to persuade men and bear up the costs of these light and momentary afflictions for the eternal weight of glory lies beyond Great Sea and beckons us to press onward and upward.

### 1. The Gospel That Jesus is the Christ is the Seed Which Multiplies the Church

- a. The Word of God was increasing
  - i. used of the kingdom of God in Jesus’ parable of the mustard tree (Luke 13:19)
    1. only times used in the book of Acts it is referring to the increase of the Word of God (12:24; 19:20)
    2. This is the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus in the parable of the Sower, the Word of God is increasing, producing fruit, replicating as it produces fruit in the tilled and fertilized soil of its hearers (Luke 8)
  - ii. Note that it is not miracles and signs which were increasing, but the Word of God, i.e. the message of the Gospel was producing the fruit of faith in its hearers in exceedingly growing numbers
- b. The number of the disciples in Jerusalem was being (passive) multiplied exceedingly
  - i. This word “multiplied” refers to the followers of believers (one time OT covenant people, 7:17, in Stephen’s sermon) all but one time (where it refers to the Word of God, 12:24)
  - ii. By this, Luke is showing that when God covenants with His people, He causes them to increase like the seeds on a stalk of grain
- c. Many multitudes of the priests were submitting to the faith
  - i. “submitting to” or “obey”
    1. “under hear” – that is, to hear a command and place oneself under its authority and act in accordance with the word
    2. Thus, the priests were submitting, or yielding, to the word of God preached by the Apostles *and were acting accordingly*
    3. It is the word used of a humble servant responding to a call (12:23, the servant-girl Rhoda answering the call from the gateway)
  - ii. The implication is that one does not “accept Jesus in their hearts”, which places the emphasis on the authority of the “acceptor”, but rather that one ‘submits’ to the truth that Jesus has all authority
    1. There is a difference, and it matters in how we present the gospel and the invitation to believe it
  - iii. The priests were recognizing that the keeper of the covenant house was not Moses, but Jesus, and they were submitting to “the faith”, i.e. the dependence upon Jesus as the Christ (5:42)
- d. In fact, the Spirit of God speaks through Luke to make a very strong connection with the growing Church under persecution and the growth of the Israelites in Egypt by using the same three words (increasing, multiplied, and exceedingly) as are used in Exodus 1:7 to describe God’s covenant faithfulness to His people under oppression

- i. By doing so, the Church is pictured as the covenant people of God and the opponents, though taking the name of God and seeing themselves as acting according to God's will, are compared to Egypt
  - 1. This may be why Luke mentions the synagogue of the "so-called freedmen" and the Cyreneans (North Africa), Alexandrians (Egypt) and distinguishes them from "those from Cilicia/Asia"
- e. Therefore, in the face of persecution, suffering, difficulties, and resistance...what do we rely upon to bring about the promises of God and the growth of the Church?
  - i. THE WORD OF GOD INCREASED which leads to the DISCIPLES MULTIPLIED EXCEEDINGLY
  - ii. If we want the Church of Jesus Christ to grow to the glory of Christ Jesus, then we need to root all that we believe and do upon the Word of God, the good news of the Holy God, His redemption in Christ Jesus, and the authority of His Christ over all things.

## 2. The Sower Sows Because He is Certain That Jesus is the Christ

- a. Stephen
  - i. one of the seven, whose name means "crown"
- b. A man full of grace and power
  - i. of grace
    - 1. grace = 'gift'
    - 2. God had given to Stephen a great ability and a great wisdom (see v10)
      - a. These 'wonders and great signs' weren't something which Stephen worked up, worked on, or worked for – they were divine gifts granted by God and on God's prerogative alone
      - b. There is no indication that all believers received such grace to accomplish such things
    - 3. All of our ability to speak the word of the gospel and do the works of God ('that you believe in the One whom He has sent', John 6:29) comes as a grace
  - ii. of power (*ability* to make things happen)
    - 1. This power is according to grace
    - 2. This power is expressed through His grasp of the redemptive plan of God as revealed in His Word
      - a. Note how greatly Stephen knows and understands God's Word and applies its present (to him) implications to himself and his people
      - b. "You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts..."
        - i. He connects their present rejection of Jesus as the Christ with the ancient rejection of Israel towards God's prophets throughout history
    - 3. When God was working redemptively, His people rejected God's workers...and God prevailed
- c. God was testifying to the veracity of His Son's authority through tokens of this authority expressed through Stephen
  - i. Great signs and wonders
    - 1. pointers, marks, or tokens which distinguishes one thing from another thing
    - 2. "great" – indicative of the quality of these distinguishing deeds, i.e. these distinguishing works were above normal and were corresponding to the "wonders" above
    - 3. likened to Moses' ministry in 7:36, showing that the ministry of the Spirit of God in Jesus' name is the continuation of God's covenant promises ultimately fulfilled in the Christ, Jesus
  - ii. This puts Stephen forth as a prophet, revealing the people's need for rescue, and pronouncing the salvation of God's people from the slavery to sin
    - 1. He would be received like a prophet, too
- d. The ministry of the Gospel is done "among the people"
  - i. The Seed of God's Word, the gospel that Jesus is the Christ, must be cast upon the Fields of Humanity

- ii. Stephen was (1) with the people, and (2) working amongst the people, and (3) distinguishing the message He proclaimed by signs and tokens which were so mighty and wondrous that people had to observe it closer
    - e. There is something to glean here about our own tendencies to clump together as believers
      - i. Stephen was out among the people, contending for the faith, doing works of grace and power for all to see
      - ii. He was unafraid to speak because he was certain of the truth that Jesus is the Christ
        - 1. His certainty was confirmed in what he saw before he died...
3. God's Word That Jesus is the Christ Will Cause Some to Contend With It
  - a. Some of those of the synagogue of the "so-called" "Free-men"
    - i. the Cyrenes and the Alexandrians (Northern Africa/Egypt)
  - b. Some of those from Cilicia and Asia
  - c. They rose up "to contend with Stephen"
    - i. They organized in order to argue with Stephen
    - ii. "contend" - compound word "to seek + together"
      - 1. discuss or inquire together, negative sense means to dispute, debate, argue with
      - 2. Can be beneficial (Luke 22:23; 24:15) or genuine truth-seeking
    - iii. So, this all started with a proper discussion and debate regarding Jesus as the Christ
4. God's Sowers Can be Certain That God's Word Never Returns Void
  - a. Stephen was convinced that Jesus is the Christ and was reasoning (wisdom) it
  - b. Note, again, that the contention that these men had with Stephen was not the working of signs and wonders, but of truth-claims, i.e. Jesus is the Christ
    - i. The charge of blasphemy is their contention - the final fulfillment of covenant promises in Christ Jesus as the greater Moses, the fulfiller of the Law, and the True Temple
    - ii. Thus Stephen stands as a fulfillment of the promise of Jesus for believers in Luke 21:14-15 and, therefore, as an example for all who stand trial for their faith in Jesus and who trust in His promises
  - c. When human hearts are convicted by the truth of God's Word, we justify error in our minds
    - i. Here we see another version of the word "to stand" to which is added the prefix "anti", which doesn't merely mean opposition, but rather "next to" or "alongside"
    - ii. Thus, the enemies of the gospel simply could not compare with the wisdom and the Spirit by which Stephen spoke
      - 1. When a person cannot stand alongside the truth claims made in the gospel, it implies a few things:
        - a. There are truth claims made which are meant to be compared
        - b. The truth claims of the opponents cannot explain the observable data as well as the gospel
          - i. The Reality of what is seen cannot be adequately explained by the opposing claims
        - c. The gospel explains the observable data the best, and thus stands alone in wisdom because it comes from the Spirit of God
          - i. The Reality of what is seen is adequately and consistently explained by the gospel that Jesus is the Christ
          - ii. Death, Resurrection, the Spirit
      - 2. So, we see that Stephen is not merely proclaiming the events of the gospel (Jesus' arrival, perfect life, death, resurrection, ascension/authority), but also explaining how their view doesn't explain reality.
        - a. Only the gospel of Jesus, the authoritative Christ, these events, interpret and control what we see and do rightly and consistently
        - b. This is the work of persuasion, or revealing the inadequacies or inconsistencies of a person's worldview
          - i. For example, the Jews believed that the Law was perfect and able to save them, delivered by angels, *yet they did not keep it (7:53)*
        - c. He reveals their problem:



- a. However, even if it is shown that one's worldview is inadequate and one is living inconsistently with it, does not imply that people will receive the truth that Jesus is the Christ
  - i. Many will believe...many will raise the stakes and change the game from debating to destroying
  - ii. They will progressively begin to seek to silence by deception, distraction, and coercion.
- b. They will coerce its silence by twisting the truth of Christian claims
  - i. False Witnesses
    - 1. "instigated" is "under-thrown"
      - a. It is to surreptitiously work to underhandedly destroy someone
      - b. They are called "false witnesses" in v13, who are "stood up" by the authorities
  - ii. Jesus (Matt 26:59) was convicted by similar subversive and deceptive false testimony
    - 1. It is to use something which one teaches and apply meaning to it which was not intended by the speaker
    - 2. Thus, neither Jesus nor Stephen meant the same thing which they were accused of, although there is a kernel of truth within it (see below concerning Moses, Law, and Temple)
- c. They will coerce its silence by judging Christian claims as immoral
  - i. Blasphemy
    - 1. Stephen is accused of slandering Moses, the Law, and God Himself
  - ii. Presumably by speaking out concerning Moses, the Law, and the Temple, he is seen as speaking against God
    - 1. This group of enemies of the gospel thought that they were doing the works of God (John 16:2)
- d. They will coerce its silence by rejecting that Jesus is the only way to God
  - i. Speaking against Moses, the law, and the Temple: the assumed means to God's blessing
  - ii. What could he have said concerning Moses, the Law, and the Temple?
    - 1. Jesus is the greater Moses, who leads God's people through the waters of death into the promised land, the completion of our redemption?
    - 2. Jesus is the completion of the Law, by fulfilling it as our representative, who pours out His Spirit to write it on our hearts?
    - 3. Jesus is the completion of the Temple, the dwelling place of God with Man, the mediator between them in His own body, and the final and ultimate sacrifice which completes all sacrifices?
    - 4. The word for "end" is the same word for "complete", thus Stephen, in proclaiming that Jesus completes the promises and intentions of all these sacred things, is deliberately misrepresented as saying that he wants to destroy them all
      - a. The same accusation made against Jesus
      - b. Matthew 26:61
- e. Yet, both Jesus and Stephen were killed because of their testimony that Jesus is the Christ – and despite the observable data, this could not be tolerated
  - i. Matthew 26:63-66 – "Are you the Christ?...Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven."
  - ii. Acts 7:52,56 – "the Righteous One" "the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

Stephen was so certain that Jesus is the fulfillment of his filial hopes promised by God throughout the ages, that he contended with the questions boldly. Over and over we see this word “to stand” or “to establish” in its various forms throughout this passage.

Stephen stood his ground to persuade his hearers that Jesus is the fulfillment of all God’s glorious promises, the keeper of the Law, the Deliverer from the slavery of Sin through the watery gash of His own body, the Leader and forerunner into the Promised Land, the Reconciler of God and Man, making the way through His own body and blood He justifies sinners and pours out the Spirit of God upon them so that God dwells with Man.

Stephen stood to proclaim hope and was questioned, and when his opponents could not stand with him in wisdom and spirit, they stood up false witnesses to twist his words. Yet he stood His ground, established by the Spirit of grace and power, and testified to the hopelessness of his “brothers and fathers” unbelief in Jesus as the Christ. He stood to expose their absolute need, and they stood up to rush him and crush him by violent coercion, if they might silence his words.

And of all the standing up, there is none so beautiful as that which Stephen saw as the dense cold stones painfully ended their violent journey to bruise and tear his flesh: Jesus was standing. He was off His throne, the Majestic One. What is it that makes the King stand up? His beloved faithful child! Stephen was received with standing ovation for not giving in or giving up. It wasn’t his eloquence or his greatness. It was his clinging to the promises. What fear can overshadow this glory? What shame can I bear on this earth which might cause me to flee the sight of the King of Kings standing to receive me?

Oh, to share in the sufferings of Christ means that we shall share in the resurrection power of His life and the glory which lies in His presence.

“But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.” (1 Pet. 4:13 ESV)