

STEPHEN THE DEACON

Acts 6

With the rapid growth in the membership of the first church at Jerusalem, there came the necessity for a larger program. An enlarged program was undertaken first by the apostles, but they soon faced the necessity of either curtailing their activities as ministers of the Word or distributing the work and dividing the responsibilities. Under the pressure of need and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the apostles recognized the necessity for the division of labor. Knowing that their first and major business was prayer and the ministry of the Word, they were unwilling to devote their time and energies to secondary matters.

In order that they might be free to give themselves to the prayerful study and the public ministry of the Word, the apostles called the members of the church together and recommended to them that something be done to provide the necessary help. They proposed the election of seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, upon whom they might place the responsibility of looking after these secondary matters. The church concurred and approved their recommendation, thus enabling the apostles to major on preaching. This plan worked so well that it gradually became permanent and resulted in the creation of the office of deacon. Through the intervening centuries, our Lord's churches have been blessed greatly and His kingdom extended by the faithful service of godly deacons. If any church is to serve the purpose for which it was established and meet the needs of those for whose welfare it is responsible, it must have some thoughtful, faithful, trustworthy and Spirit-led deacons to work with the pastor.

Among the seven who were chosen by the Jerusalem church to serve in this capacity, Stephen occupied the first place. He is one of the most beautiful characters and charming personalities mentioned in the Bible. He possessed all of the qualities necessary to success in this high and important office. A prayerful and thorough study of the life and work of this remarkable and laudable deacon should be of genuine interest and great helpfulness to you brethren who are about to be set apart to similar work in our church. Your election to this office is simply and distinctly a call to serve. Your office is not merely a post of honor, but it is a medium of service. You are now about to be inaugurated into a highly responsible service for God, your church and your fellow men.

We are impressed with the fulness of Stephen's life. In what did his fulness consist?

1. He was full of wisdom.

"Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business" (Acts 6:3). Though he was young in years, Stephen was wise. Those with perplexities and problems with which they did not know how to cope talked freely with Stephen about them. They consulted him about the difficult things in connection with the administration of the church affairs. His suggestions revealed keen insight and thorough understanding.

Differences between the Grecians and the Hebrews in the Jerusalem church caused a murmuring to arise. A murmur in a church may soon become a noise, rising in velocity until it becomes a raging storm. Wise leadership may stop such murmurings before much harm is done. Without wise leadership, a church may be wrecked easily. The very fact that Stephen, along with six other men, was selected to handle this delicate situation, coupled with the fact that he soon became the leader of this group, brands him as a man of wisdom. He dealt with Greeks and Hebrews alike, with complete justice. He certainly demonstrated great wisdom by settling disputes.

2. He was full of faith.

"And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 6:5). No room was reserved in his life for the entertainment of doubt. Because he was full of faith there was a fine intimacy between

God and him. They delighted in each other. He also had faith in men. How do we know that? Because people believed in him and trusted him. Faith begets faith. If you put a question mark after the names of others, you may rest assured that they will put the same kind of a mark after your name.

Stephen's faith was the kind that has vision and takes in the whole scheme of things-- God's purpose, plans, wisdom, mercy, justice and grace. His great faith led him into hard labor, great sacrifices and eventually death, but it also caused his picture to be painted on the canvas of time, where it will stand forever in the hall of fame, to inspire other men to follow his noble example.

Some of us have but a drop of faith and conclude that we are full of it, but Stephen's life was really saturated with it. Faith was the driving force of his life. It filled him with a deathless conviction. Faith enabled Stephen to see the hand of God in history, guiding the affairs of men. Faith is not just something to talk about. It is more than a theory, and more than a dogma. It is a living stream that flows through one's whole life and finds many outlets. It expresses itself in attitudes, in words, in lives and in services.

Stephen was illuminated, inspired and strengthened by faith. It was his faith that made him eloquent, bold and Christlike. It was faith that brought the angelic look into his face. Faith is the secret of all great accomplishments.

3. He was full of the scriptures.

Stephen related the entire "history of God's dealings with the nation of Israel from the call of Abraham to the rejection of Christ." He knew full well what he was talking about when he recounted their history. He was well versed in the scriptures. His address was scriptural, one quotation followed another.

4. He was full of the Holy Spirit.

"But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). Stephen saw Christ and the glory of God, and his very face shone with the inward peace and light that radiated with a halo, as if his face were that of an angel. His numerous graces and excellent qualities were the result of the fact that he was indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Genuine piety is indispensable to any deacon. He must be a man of prayer--in secret, at home and at church. He should avail himself of the spiritual enrichment afforded by the mid-week prayer service. It is his duty to be present. If he is a man of prayer, consecration and faithfulness, he will have far more influence with the members of his church.

Stephen was "full of the Holy Spirit." That left nothing to be desired.

5. He was full of power.

"And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people" (Acts 6:8). Where Stephen went things happened. He had a tremendous influence. It is said that "they were not able to resist the spirit and the wisdom by which he spake." He had the kind of power which could not be resisted. Power is the ability to do things. To have power is useless and vain unless it is the kind of power which brings with it the enablement to do things. Our Lord never asks a person to do a thing without thoroughly enabling that individual to do that very thing. Stephen was a man ready for use in the humble sphere of serving tables and God gave him the power to do his work faithfully because he was willing to do what his hands found to do. Stephen was a man who did something for the Lord wherever he was. The power of God is never given to anybody to squander or to waste, but to use for Him.

6. He was full of courage.

He was filled with holy boldness to such an extent that he spoke the Word of God fearlessly. He said, "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it" (Acts 7:51-53).

It was divine courage which enabled Stephen to speak after that fashion. It was the courage placed there by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. The faces of those enraged enemies did not cause him to fear nor to flinch. He was not so much as moved by them.

When they were defeated in debate, the leaders of the synagogue resorted to unscrupulous methods to get rid of Stephen. The only thing the mob had against him was that he had the courage to tell the truth without fear or favor to the people whom he was trying to enlighten and win. We cannot keep from being impressed by Stephen's fearlessness of man, his courage born of deep conviction, his freedom from Jewish prejudice, his knowledge of the scriptures, his spiritual insight and his skill in handling God's truth.

7. He was full of love.

"And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:60). Refusing to believe the truth which Stephen spoke, the furious mob surged like angry beasts upon the helpless prisoner, and rushed him out of the city to administer capital punishment by stoning him. As they pelted him with stones, this wonderful deacon committed his soul into the keeping of the Saviour, whom he beheld in glory. Evidently, the first stones struck him while he was standing. As they continued to strike him, he fell to his knees and prayed for those who were taking his life saying, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." This was a convincing proof of the transforming power of the love of Christ in the human heart. He did not have any animosity in his heart toward the men who were stoning him to death. His attitude, like that of the Saviour on the cross, was one of genuine pity, compassionate love and complete forgiveness. With unshaken courage, sweet composure, genuine faith and fervent love Stephen went to his death in the prime of usefulness. After living beautifully, he died bravely. Thus Stephen became the first of the followers of Christ to suffer martyrdom. In doing so he bore a wonderful testimony to the power of the living Saviour and Lord.

One of the spectators who seemed to be delighted with the pitiless fury of the mob was Saul of Tarsus. He guarded the cloaks of those who assaulted Stephen. By his presence, his silence and his willingness to guard the garments of the murderers, Saul gave his hearty approval to Stephen's martyrdom.

This scene, so like unto the crucifixion of Christ Jesus, was forever implanted upon Saul's mind. Stephen's demonstration of how a real Christian can die for Christ made an indelible impression on Saul. His voice in prayer never ceased to echo in Saul's ears. As Augustine said, "Si Stephanus non orasset, ecclesia Paulum non habuisset," which means, "If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul." Humanly speaking, if Stephen had not prayed, Paul would not have preached.