

A RADIANT CHRISTIAN

Acts 6 - 7

On the day of Pentecost and immediately thereafter many people from numerous walks of life united with the church. Among them were foreign-born Jews and those who were born at home. While they had formerly hated each other, they were welded together in the bonds of Christian love. However, this wonderful spirit of Christian love did not continue long without interruption.

Many of those who became Christians were not permitted to return home. Cut off from all financial support, they naturally became poverty-stricken. Some remarkably generous men, like Barnabas, gave their all to provide funds with which to support these homeless and needy Christians. The funds contributed for this purpose were administered by the Apostles.

It was not long until dissatisfaction arose in the church over the distribution of the funds to the needy widows. The foreign-born and Greek-speaking Jews declared that the charity funds were not being distributed fairly, that partiality was being shown to the widows in the other group. Through the intervening centuries there have been so many murmurings in the churches about the way that money has been collected and distributed. It has also been strikingly noticeable that the complaints have not come from the contributors. Complainers simply publicize the fact that they are not contributors.

It soon became obvious to the Apostles that, if they were going to continue the administration of these funds, it would have to be done at the expense of their preaching. They could no longer do both efficiently. They readily decided that they could not afford to devote their time and energies to secondary matters at the expense of neglecting the weightier matters of prayer and preaching. They knew that their first and major task was prayer and the ministry of the Word.

Under the pressure of need and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles called the members of the church together and recommended to them that they select "seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom," and turn this business over to them. The church approved their recommendation, thus enabling them to major on preaching.

Among the seven who were chosen Stephen had the first place. Stephen was one of the most beautiful characters and charming personalities whose name was recorded in the Bible. He embodied the highest qualities of Christian manhood.

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

1. Stephen was full of wisdom.

"Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest

report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business" (Acts 6:3). From reading the few scriptural statements about Stephen one promptly and easily reaches the conclusion that, although he was young, he was a man of great wisdom. The very fact that he was selected with six other men to handle the delicate and difficult situation which arose in the Jerusalem church, and which required wisdom of the highest type, proved that Stephen was a man of wisdom. Stephen demonstrated his wisdom by settling disputes. Those with perplexities and problems, with which they did not know how to cope, freely talked with Stephen about them. When the members consulted him about the administration of the church affairs his suggestions to them revealed a keen insight and remarkable wisdom.

2. Stephen was full of faith.

"And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). There simply was not any room in Stephen's life for the entertainment of doubt. Because of his great faith in God there was a fine intimacy between them. They delighted in each other. He was unusually receptive to Christian truth, as well as active and zealous in the proclamation of it. His great faith led him to work quietly and faithfully to establish the kingdom of God.

Stephen also had faith in other people. How do we know that he believed in and trusted people? We know it because people believed in him. They had absolute confidence in Stephen. Faith always begets faith. If you put a question mark after the names of others, you may rest assured that others will put the same kind of a mark after your name.

3. Stephen was full of power.

"And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people" (Acts 6:8). Things happened where Stephen went. He had a tremendous influence. Concerning this God's Word says, "And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake" (Acts 6:10). Stephen had the kind of power which could not be resisted. This power he had received from the Holy Spirit to whom he had yielded his heart and life. Through the power of the Spirit he was able to do "great wonders and miracles among the people." To have power is useless unless it brings with it the enablement to do things. Stephen was a man who did something for his Lord wherever he went. God gave him the opportunity and ability to do His work because he was willing to do what he could for Him. God does not give His power to be wasted. Because Stephen had the surging power of God flowing through him, he was a truly radiant Christian.

4. Stephen was full of courage.

It was divine courage which Stephen possessed. It was the courage that was placed in him by the indwelling Spirit of God. Stephen was filled with holy boldness and did not hesitate to speak the Word of God fearlessly. In the first part of his speech Stephen guarded his words in such a way as to avoid being offensive, but the longer he spoke the more the fire burned within him and near the end he spoke with accents of great indignation. He said, "Ye

stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye" (Acts 7:51). Stephen bore effective testimony to the power of the resurrected and living Christ.

5. Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit.

His numerous graces and excellent qualities were the result of his being indwelt by the Holy Spirit. God's Word says, "But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). Stephen's personality was brought under the domination and control of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had absolute possession and mastery of his spirit, thus enabling him to do the will of God. His will had been brought into subjection to the Holy Spirit, and that accounted for his delights, discernments and decisions conforming to the will of God.

6. Stephen was full of trust.

On account of his bold and fearless testimony to the person, life and ministry of Christ, certain enemies of the Saviour engaged Stephen in an argument. Stephen defended his Christian position with such wisdom and zeal that his opponents could not defeat him in debate. He so confounded them with his argument that they had no alternative but to acknowledge their errors or to silence him by force. To the latter method they resorted. They seized him, brought him before the Sanhedrin and bribed false witnesses to swear that he was guilty of blasphemy, in order that they might put him to death.

It was the custom of that court to allow an accused person to plead guilty or not guilty, and to speak in his own defense. As they listened to Stephen's defense the infuriated Jews were enraged by his boldness and his unanswerable logic. Anger is usually the proof of guilt, prejudice or weakness. They became so violent that they rushed on Stephen and tried to tear him to pieces.

Discerning their reactions to his masterful exposure of their sins, Stephen remarked in substance, "You may put me to death if you desire, but you cannot prevent the doors of heaven from opening wide for me, nor can you interfere with Christ standing at the right hand of God to welcome me home, for already I have seen Him in that very position." Stephen had an implicit faith or trust in Christ. He firmly believed that the Lord would take care of him. "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). It was his trust in God that made Stephen so Christlike and brought the angelic look into his face. The indwelling Spirit of God made Stephen's face to glow as the face of an angel.

7. Stephen was full of love.

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, he prayed and committed his soul into the keeping of his Saviour, whom he

beheld in glory. Evidently the first stones struck him while he was standing. As they continued to strike him he struggled to his knees and prayed for those who were taking his life saying, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

Stephen's prayer was 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 pity, love and forgiveness. His supreme desire was to accomplish God's will in his life, and if that will included death for him, then he would welcome it. With unshaken courage, sweet composure, genuine faith and fervent love Stephen went to his death in the very prime of his usefulness. After living beautifully, he died bravely, while praying and commending his spirit into the keeping of his Lord whom he beheld in glory. God's Word says, "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). This memorable prayer for his murderers while he was dying is positive proof of Stephen's compassionate love.

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. To say the least, by his presence, silence and 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, was implanted indelibly upon Saul's mind. Stephen's demonstration of how a real Christian can die for Christ made a lasting impression on Saul. His voice in prayer never ceased to echo in Saul's ears. One is reminded of what Augustine said, "If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul." Humanly speaking, if Stephen had not prayed, Paul would not have preached. Be that as it may, Stephen was a radiant Christian and the first of Christ's followers to suffer martyrdom.