

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Acts 6--7.

During the busy and eventful weeks immediately following the day of Pentecost, people separated by wide chasms were brought into the fold of the Christian brotherhood. Among this number were foreign-born Jews and home-born Jews. These had hated each other in the past, but now they were being welded together by the bonds of their common faith in Jesus Christ. This growing spirit of brotherliness, however, was not permitted to continue without hindrance. The cause of this unfortunate situation was this: many of the recent converts to Christianity were not allowed to return home. They were cut off from all financial support. They stood face to face with pinching poverty. To meet the demand for immediate help, big-hearted men came forward, such as Barnabas, and gave their all to support of these needy and homeless converts. The funds thus obtained were put into the hands of the Apostles and were administered by them.

However, the administration of the Twelve did not prove satisfactory. The foreign-born Jews or Hellenists became convinced that they were not getting a square deal. They claimed that their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Thus trouble in the early church came up over women and money.

Stephen is introduced to us in connection with a quarrel in the church about the distribution of alms among needy widows. Complaint of partiality and unfairness having arisen, the apostles suggested that the church select seven men of unquestioned integrity, in whom they had full confidence, to look after the distribution of church funds and kindred matters. This procedure would allay all suspicion and would enable the apostles to give their undivided attention to prayer and to the ministry of God's Word.

In compliance with this suggestion, seven reputable men were chosen and set apart as "helpers" of the apostles, whose time was being unduly consumed by material affairs. That was an exceedingly wise decision. What a pity that all ministers and churches have not exercised similar wisdom!

Those selected came from the Hellenistic group, which was the one from which complaints were heard first. This was another mark of wisdom.

I. The Depiction Of Stephen.

Among the seven chosen, Stephen had the first place. Stephen is one of the most beautiful characters and charming personalities mentioned in the Bible. He was not a super-human character, but he embodied in himself the highest qualities of Christian manhood. Being "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit," he was supernaturally endowed with power. He was remarkable because of the grace and power of God. His soul was charged and surcharged with the power of God. God gave him the ability to work miracles, which power he used to relieve suffering humanity and to point men to the Lord Jesus Christ.

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

1. He was full of wisdom. Acts 6:3.

Though young in years he was wise. Those with perplexities and problems with which they did not know how to cope freely talked with Stephen about them. They consulted him about the difficult things in connection with the administration of the church affairs. His suggestions revealed the keen insight of genius.

2. He was full of faith. Acts 6:5.

Because of his 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 he believed in and trusted people? People believed in him. They had absolute confidence in him. Faith begets faith. If you put a question after the names of others, you may rest assured that they will put the same kind of a mark after your name.

3. He was full of power. 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."

4. He was full of courage. Acts 7:51.

He was filled with holy boldness, so that he spoke the Word of God fearlessly.

5. He was full of the Word of God. Acts 7:2-54.

6. He was full of the Holy Spirit. Acts 7:55.

His numerous graces and excellent qualities were the result of the fact that he was indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

7. He was full of trust. Acts 7:59.

8. He was full of compassionate love. Acts 7:60.

II. The Defense of Stephen. Acts 7:2-54.

Stephen's gifts eminently qualified him for preaching and for performing miracles. In both spheres he was unusually proficient and successful. He was an eloquent and effective preacher of the gospel. Many of the cultured, religious aristocrats in Jerusalem would have been glad to have ignored Stephen, but they were not able to do so. On account of his bold and fearless testimony to the person, life and ministry of Jesus Christ, certain enemies of Christ engaged Stephen in an argument. When the dispute arose, 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 arguments that they had no alternative, but to acknowledge their errors, or to silence him by force. To this latter method they resorted. They seized him, brought him before the Sanhedrin, bribed 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. This address, recorded in 7:2-54, is his defense. These infuriated Jews were enraged by the boldness of the preacher and his unanswerable logic. Anger is natural when one cannot meet an argument nor explain his conduct. Violence is often resorted to when reason fails. When he exposed their sins, he could not escape the wrath of the enraged evil doers. Rather than accept the truth, they condemned Stephen to death.

III. The Death of Stephen. Acts 7:54-60.

When one cannot meet an argument or explain his conduct he frequently resorts to anger. Such was the reaction of Stephen's enemies when he delivered his masterful address and exposed their sins. Discerning their reaction, 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 Jesus standing at the right hand of God

to welcome me home, for already I have seen Him in that very position." Refusing to believe the truth which he spoke, the furious mob surged like angry beasts upon the helpless prisoner, and rushed him out of the city to administer captial punishment by stoning him.

As they pelted him with stones, he prayed and 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 struggled 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 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 prime of usefulness. After living beautifully, he died bravely.

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, 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 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, "If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul." Humanly speaking, if Stephen had not prayed, Paul would not have preached.