

Stephen is introduced to us in connexion with a quarrel about the distribution of Church funds.

1. The work of the Apostles at Jerusalem had been growing so rapidly that they found it impracticable, at length, to give their personal attention to the distribution of charities among needy Christians, which had come to be a large and important responsibility. Many of these were Greek-speaking Jews, as they were called, or Hellenists, who had come from the various provinces around, as distinguished from the native or Palestinian Jews. A fund had been provided toward the support of the more needy converts among both these classes. Some complaint having arisen that there had been unfairness in the distribution by those who had been appointed to the work, that the widows, especially, of the Hellenists or Greek-speaking Jews were being neglected in the daily ministrations, the Apostles took steps not only to remove all grounds of complaint, but at the same time to relieve themselves of the burden of looking after the distribution of alms altogether. They proposed that the Christian people of Jerusalem should select seven men, in whom they had full confidence, to have charge of the whole business, in order that they themselves might be left free to give their undivided attention to the work of preaching the gospel.

2. The first and most prominent name in the list of deacons is that of Stephen, of whom it is expressly stated that he was "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."

Devout expositors of Scripture have recognized in his name a prophecy of his greatness. Stephen is Stephanos, a garland or crown, in the Greek language. Garlands or crowns were given by the ancient Greeks to those who rendered good services to their cities, or brought fame to them by winning triumphs in the great national games. And Stephen had his name divinely chosen for him by that Divine Providence which orders all things, because he was to win in the fulness of time an imperishable garland, and to gain a crown of righteousness, and to render highest services to the Church of God by his teaching and by his testimony even unto death.

Stephen's character and abilities, as indicated in the narrative, were evidently of a high order. ----- He must have been a diligent and independent student of Scripture, for when at length he appears for a brief interval upon the stage, it is with fully matured views, which were, in many respects, far in advance of his contemporary Christians.

We know nothing of the circumstances of his conversion to Christianity. ---- probable that he was one of those who had enjoyed the advantage of hearing the living Jesus, and of drawing from its very fountain-head the river of the water of life.

Stephen's work was not confined to the distribution of alms, to which duty he had been specially called, important as that duty was. In addition to his qualifications for that office, he possessed gifts which fitted him for preaching and for performing miracles--functions which were characteristically apostolic. In this sphere he was remarkably successful, and became conspicuous because of his effectiveness and power. Many converts were won to Christ through his efforts.

THE DEFENCE

1. Stephen's defence is really one of the finest things in that Book of splendours--the Word of God. Carelessly reading it, one might take it for an epitome of the history of his people.

2. A denunciation so scathing and so fearless, from the lips of a prisoner whose life depended on their will, might well have startled them. He could hardly have addressed them in words more calculated to kindle their fury. The very terms in which he characterized their bearing, being borrowed from their own Law and Prophets, added force to the previous epitome of their history, and to call them uncircumcised in heart and ears was to reject with scorn the idle fancies that circumcision alone was

enough to save them from God's wrath, and that uncircumcision was worse than crime.

Stephen is one of the most attractive and most interesting of all Bible Characters.

While the actual martyrdom of Stephen taught men that Christianity was not only the force which was to triumph, but the power in which they were to suffer, and bear, and die. Stephen's career was a type of all martyr lives, and embraces every possible development through which Christ's Church and His servants had afterwards to pass.-- obscurity, fame, activity, death---fixing high the standard for all ages'.

The illegality of the proceeding is beyond dispute, for, on the admission of the chief priests themselves, the Sanhedrin had no power to put to death; but it is not necessary to view it at all in the light of a judicial action. It was an outbreak of mob violence on the part of the leaders of the nation, which could easily be disavowed, if necessary, by the Council.

Stephen was hurried by the mob to some spot outside the Holy City, and then they proceeded in regular, judicial style so far as their fury would allow them. The place, the mode of death, the first stone thrown by the witnesses, were all in exact accordance with ancient precedent and express Mosaic statute.

Stephen's death was his last act of imitation of his Lord. The account of it is obviously modelled on that of Jesus. ---- But why should not the martyr have sought to die like his Lord, as well as the writer to make him die so? ----- And if the resemblance of Stephen's words to our Lord's on the cross is noticeable, the differences also are worth observing. Christ prayed to God; Stephen to Jesus. Christ said "I commit"; Stephen said, "Take". ---- That martyr death was a Christ-copying act of forgiving love.

It has ever been the faith of the Church that Saul was the fruit of Stephen's prayers. "Si Stephanus non orasset, Ecclesia Paulum non haberet," was one of its sayings.

STEPHEN'S CHARACTER

1. Stephen is described by certain significant phrases.

(1) He was a man "full of faith." It was faith in the highest degree. While others showed timidity and were in danger of wavering, he stood firm as a rock against every withering blast of error and storm of unbelief. His supreme trust was in Christ, in whom he confided with all his heart, and to whom he clung as the only One who could help and save.

(2) He was not only "full of faith," but also "full of the Holy Spirit." And rich in privilege as the life of faith is, this is a higher step in Christian attainment.

(3) It is no wonder, then that Stephen is described as being "full of grace," as reflecting in his life the life of Christ in all its singular charm of gentleness and strength. And with grace he had "power," a strong word in the Greek, which we have carried into English, in a term which deals with the science of forces, "dynamics," and in the expression of "dynamite," a material which possesses great explosive force.

(4) Stephen was a man "full of wisdom." This was a necessary qualification on the part of men who were called to the conduct of affairs. Their chief duties were administrative. We usually think of Stephen as a beautiful and lofty character, standing on a pedestal above others in true nobility of life, in a spirit of detachment from mundane affairs. But we do well to remember that he was specially selected on account of his descretion, because of his aptitude for practical business and his capacity for work.

Stephen as the record of his trial shows, was possessed of marvellous intellectual

powers, coupled with wonderful facility of expression and utterance. His eloquence, when he stood before his judges, was irresistible. They "were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake." His adversaries could not understand it, ~~xbutxStaxxx~~

(5) We might also say that Stephen was a man full of love. His triumph over force was the triumph of forgiving love.

2. Stephen stood the supreme test that can be applied to any life. He was "faithful unto death."

They were "notable to resist the wisdom with which he spake." He proved victorious in the debate, for two reasons. First he was evidently a practised logician. His Greek culture and Hebrew studies made him a man of great resource in argument. His speech shows him to be a man of keen philosophic insight. The second and chief reason was that he had truth on his side.

Stephen spoke with a marvellous spirit--he imparted warmth, beauty, life, force to his arguments.

Stephen was full of "grace and power"; full of power with men because ~~xxx~~ full of grace from God. From the Divine resources these came down heavenly influences into his soul--illumination, sanctity, zeal--and he was strong to interest, to instruct, to convince, to persuade.

Stephen was more than an almoner. He was a deep student of the Old Testament, a theologian of unusual insight, a powerful reasoner and an advanced Christian.

Stephen as a Man of Power -- This was shown in (1) the influence of his personal character; (2) in his indomitable energy and perseverance; (3) in his stores of scriptural knowledge; (4) in his intellectual gifts; (5) in his unanswerable arguments; (6) in his ability to add miraculous attestations. Men could not resist the "wisdom and the Spirit by which he spake."

He was a man full of grace and power. But he was not all grace; he was full of power. There was strength as well as sweetness, goodness as well as gentleness, truth as well as tenderness, conviction as well as compassion. He never sacrificed one for the other but was always a beautiful blending of both. He never sacrificed truth for the sake of sentiment. He had the beauty of character but also strength of purpose. His words were tender to the extreme but they were also full of deep meaning.

He was able to work wonders and miracles because he was full of grace and power. Here we have cause and effect.

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus which follows the story of this murder is undoubtedly the outcome of Stephen's dying. Saul never could forget Stephen's glowing face, powerful praying, and vital vision. Heaven was opened to this dying saint and he saw Jesus waiting for him. Never forget Saul as you see Stephen suffer so shamefully. From our side of things if Stephen had not died Saul would not have been saved. So then the price was wonderfully worth it.

Stephen was not content to confine his activities to the specific duties of a deacon, but fearlessly and with great power he preached the gospel of Jesus. He entered the Jewish Synagogue and the Doctors of the Law found themselves fairly beaten in argument by the wisdom of this ardent champion of the Christian faith.

False witnesses were then hired to accuse him of blasphemy, of which charge he was, of course, not guilty, but they caught him and brought him in before the Sanhedrin for trial.

It was when asked by the high priest whether the things charged against him were true that Stephen made his celebrated defense.

Stephen was a trained orator and scholar and with a bright and fervid eloquence he recited the successive steps of Old Testament history, and showed with convincing logic how transitory the Law and the Tabernacle and the Temple really were; how they were but shadows of things to come and pointed to the coming of One in Whom they were all to be fulfilled.

His wonderful openness of mind; his perfect freedom from all the prepossessions, prejudices, and superstitions of his day; his courage, his eloquence, his spotless character; with a certain sweet, and at the same time majestic, manner; all combined to set Stephen in the very front rank both of service and of risk. In all these things, and especially in the openness, receptiveness, and ripeness of his, Stephen far outstripped even such pillar apostles as Peter and James and John themselves.

His intellectual power, his spiritual insight and foresight, with the strength of his faith and the warmth of his devotion, were all such that he soon found himself deep in apostolic duty, as well as in the proper work of the deaconship. After his purely deaconship work was done, and springing immediately out of his way of doing it, Stephen felt himself constrained on many occasions to take a still more public part in the support and the defence and the edification of the infant Church of Jerusalem. But malice always follows eminence in this world, as Stephen soon found out to his cost. Ignorance, superstition, prejudice, ill-will, odium, all began to dog Stephen's footsteps and to raise their murderous misrepresentations against him in every synagogue into which he entered. And the better he spoke, and the more unanswerably, the more were the enemies that he raised both against himself and against the truth, till his enemies had their own way with him.

Their public teaching and preaching, and certain still more important matters, would be seriously interfered with, till the twelve apostles took the wise step that is recorded in this chapter. It is not reason, they said, and we cannot go on with it, that we should leave the Word of God in order to serve tables to this extent. Wherefore, brethren, look out among yourselves seven men whom we may appoint over this business. And we will, all the more, give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. And this proposal of the apostles commended itself to the common sense of the whole Church, and they chose seven select men and set them before the apostles for ordination. And we inherit the wisdom and the benefit of that apostolic example to this day. The Church of our day also says to her members and to her office-bearers something like this:- 'It is utterly unreasonable that our ministers should all alone be expected to perform all the multitudinous work that arises out of a great congregation. It is quite preposterous that any one man should be expected to preach two or three sermons a week, keep in close contact with a thousand people, baptize our children, marry our sons and daughters, console our sick, bury our dead, find work for our unemployed, negotiate loans of money and gather gifts for our embarrassed members, get our aged and our orphaned into asylums and hospitals, besides many other things that can neither be foreseen nor set aside by our ministers.'

9

Troubles were bound to arise in due time to the Christian Church. It could not be otherwise. Christianity is an aggressive religion and just for that reason it is bound, sooner or later, to come into conflict with the powers that be, if these powers are not already Christian.

Our lesson today deals with the first member of the Christian Church who, through his faithfulness to Jesus Christ our Lord, sealed his testimony with his life's blood.. The first thing brought before us is

I. The Character of Stephen.

He was one of a band of seven men who were chosen by the Church to see that all Christians, especially the widows of the Grecian Jews, were not neglected in the daily ministrations. They were to serve tables. But to qualify them for this work, we are told that they were to be men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom. We are told of Stephen that he was a man full of faith and power and that he did great wonders and miracles among the people. Evidently he was an outstanding man in the Church. The proof of that is easily shown for God does not communicate His power to men who are not whole-heartedly His and the fact that he wrought wonders and miracles is a proof that he was a good man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost. It is evident also that he was an outstanding preacher, for it was because he was such that he was singled out for attack. A man of poor ability would have been ignored or treated with contempt.

II. Stephen's Controversy.

How or where the disputations were carried on we are not told, but we are told that "they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

Unable to defeat him in argument they had recourse to a method that only a weak party will ever turn to. They suborned men and persuaded them to bring false witness against him. These men said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." ~~XXXXXXXX~~

It was an easy thing to stir up the people of the Jews, especially on matters pertaining to their religion.

III. Stephen Arrested.

They caught him and brought him before the highest council of the Jews, the Sanhedrim. The Sanhedrim was composed of chief priests, elders and scribes. Before this council that Stephen was brought and the charge laid against him was brought by false witnesses.

These words roused the members of the Sanhedrim to fury, especially as they could not deny them. We read that when they heard these things they were cut to the heart. But in that hour there was given to this intrepid servant of Christ a vision that filled his heart with joy. He saw Jesus standing on the right hand of God. Standing, as though deeply interested, watching His servant and listening with approval to his testimony. They ran on, him with one accord cast him out of the city and stoned him. But even in that hour Stephen prayed for them, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge," and fell asleep. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet whose name was Saul.

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consist? That is a supremely important question. There are some full folks that we cannot get rid of. We often say, "I could like him, but he is so full of himself. He is so full of irony. He is so full of sarcasm. He is so full of trickery and treachery." But what of Stephen?

(1) He was "full of faith"

He was not a man with a meager and timid and invalid faith. He was a man full of faith, so full that though doubt came and knocked at his door every morning, noon, and night, Stephen simply smiled and shook his head as if to say "No room. Faith is my guest now."

That means that Stephen was on good terms with God. That means that God delighted in Stephen and he delighted in God. That means that there was a fine intimacy between them. Not only was he full of faith toward God. He was also full of faith toward men. It does not take a wise man to see why this is true. How do we know that Stephen trusted people? How do we know that he believed in folks? Here is positive proof: folks believed in him. The whole brotherhood regarded him with firm trust and confidence. Faith begets faith but if you put a question after everybody's name, do not forget that they will put that same kind of mark after yours.

(2) He was "full of wisdom"

He had that faith that could see visions and dream dreams, but he was more than a dreamer. He was a man of common sense. He was a man who brought those faculties that would have made him a leader in the world of finance or of politics and dedicated them fully upon the altar of his Lord.

If there was an individual with perplexities and problems with which he did not know how to cope, he came and talked with Stephen about them. If there were hard questions about the administration of the church affairs they consulted Stephen. He was always ready with a suggestion that showed the keen insight of genius. Though young in years he was wise.

(3) He was "full of power"

Where Stephen went, things happened. Changes took place, revolutions were wrought, and it stands written, "they were not able to resist the spirit and the wisdom by which he spake." This young saint was full of moral dynamite. He was a spiritual tornado. He swept things before him with an irresistible force.

(4) He was "full of grace"

That is, he was charming. He was magnetic. He was fascinating. He was attractive. He cast a spell over folks. He was as winsome as the springtime; as attractive as sea music. When others were in his presence, they found themselves comforted and helped. The broken-hearted forgot to sob when he was by. The hopeless forgot their despair. The wounded forgot their hurts. He was a gracious man.

(5) He was "full of the Holy Ghost"

Stephen was a greatly gifted young man. Not another man in the Church in his day had as much ability. He was cultured and well-trained. But this does not account for his life of power. What, then, is the secret? All the fine graces that we have mentioned are but the outcome of this last fullness. You can only account for his graces and fine enviable qualities by saying that he was a man in whom Christ dwelt in the person of the Holy Spirit.

2. He was useful in service to others

His time was consumed in doing good for others. He was appointed to a position that looked quite small. He was to help administer the temporal affairs of a semi-pauper Church. But he made these temporal affairs to administer to the highest spiritual ends. He gave out bread in such a fashion as to make men hunger for the Bread of Life. He worked with his might in his small sphere and God honored him and made him a mighty lay preacher. His spiritual experience was a dynamic that drove him to practical service.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the consecrated Christian should likewise be practical. It should manifest itself in---

- (1) A deep spiritual experience through our possession of conquering power
- (2) High ethics, expressing themselves in right living, benevolences, doctrinal consistency etc.
- (3) Personal witnessing for Christ

II. Power In Polemics.

How effective he was in his preaching. Jerusalem was a proud and wicked city. It was full of cultured and religious aristocrats. They would have given almost anything to have been able to ignore Stephen. But they could not ignore him. They might as well have tried to ignore a cyclone. Scarcely a man in the city was stupid and sleepy enough not to know that Stephen was in the city on a business trip for his King. As he labored many fell in love with his Lord while others grew bitter in their opposition to him. The Jews could not resist the power by which Stephen spoke.

He is a transition man in the New Testament. His speech and death marked the transition of Christianity from its earliest Jewish form to its extension among the Gentiles.

This Spirit-filled man had a clear and comprehensive grasp of the purposes and works of God in Old Testament history. He begins his message by reviewing the history of the Jews from Abraham and the patriarchs. They all listen attentively. Then, he recounts their history from Moses to David. Then, he tells of the building of Solomon's Temple and gives a piece of exegesis on where God is to be worshipped. He said the same thing that Jesus did at Nazareth and that aroused their enmity. He plainly taught the spirituality and universality of the Christian faith. He closed with a short but vehement application about their treatment of God's Prophet.

He spoke right on though he knew that he was digging his own grave as he spoke. "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost; as your fathers did, so do ye." Thus, he accuses them of resisting the Holy Spirit, perpetuating the spirit of persecution, and betraying and crucifying the Son of God. He noticed the anger in their eyes as they interrupted his speech with strong ejaculations. His message, however, was a masterpiece of sacred eloquence, a witness to the truth of the Old Testament history, a testimony to the sustaining power of religion, a noble vindication of Christ and the Christian religion.

III. Power In Persecution.

The conviction wrought in the hearts of his hearers aroused them to a hatred of him and to active persecution. They were quite proud and it was hard for them to endure public humiliation. So being defeated, they adopted the recourse of slander. They "suborned men" who were willing to perjure themselves for pay in the interest of Jewish orthodoxy. Stephen soon found himself under arrest for

blasphemy and heresy and arraigned before the Sanhedrin. The assembly believed the false witnesses and it became a mob and rushed at him in a rage. His keen irony had stung them to the quick. His sarcasm had cut to the bone. His words had cut like a buzz-saw and their teeth clattered like wolves for a victim. There was an uncontrollable outbreak of the mob and Stephen was rushed out of the city. The scene that follows is nothing more than a common lynching. They had not been able to resist the inspired logic of Stephen, so in order to get revenge, they pelt him with stones. The "witnesses" began the stoning as was their privilege. It was too dirty a piece of work for the nice young rabbi, Saul of Tarsus. However, he was well pleased with what was going on so he held or guarded the clothes of those who did the job. Stephen's angelic face became bruised and blood-stained. As he fell a victim to their hate he died praying for the forgiveness of his persecutors. He prayed, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." This last cry of the dying martyr is a convincing proof of the transforming power of the love of Christ in the heart. This scene, so like unto the crucifixion of Jesus, was forever implanted upon the mind of Saul who watched him. ~~He~~ He was never able to banish the picture of the angelic face of this first Christian martyr from his mind and heart. Stephen had left his mark upon Saul and the latter became his real successor. "Si Stephanus non orasset, ecclesia Paulum non habuisset." If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul. Truly, if Stephen had not prayed, Paul would not have preached. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, lived a life of power and was a blessing while he lived. He has been an abiding blessing through all the changing years.