

Evangelism 2024 Pt. 1 – Stephen

Pastor James Foley – Shared Sunday, June 23, 2024

INTRODUCTION

KEY – Today will be unique. In some regards I will offer a standalone sermon on a biblical figure I find intriguing. In another sense, this sermon will function as the unofficial start to a new multi-part series on a timely theme. Without much in the way of introduction, let us launch into our topic with the briefest of remarks. Please note:

NOTE 1 – In General the Book of Acts centers upon the HS-empowered exploits of a-tier men like Peter and Paul. It is nigh impossible to exaggerate the import of such men, their place in Acts, or their contribution to the faith. Yet beneath this a-tier there remains a group of men and women just as profound in some regards, even if they occupy far less literary real estate! Figures like Philip, Simon Magus, Ananias, Cornelius, Barnabas and John Mark, Silas, Apollos, Priscilla and Aquilla, Lydia, Agabus, Mnason and more all arrest our attention and offer instruction.

NOTE 2 – Yet there remains a special place in Acts and in the history of Christianity for one character in particular:

Q. Who?

A. Stephen (cf. Acts 6–7).

NOTE 3 – This morning I would like to consider this biblical figure in some detail, considering applications in kind.

DELVING IN

NOTE 1 – When we first encounter Stephen he is posited as a solution to a broader problem in the Early Church. You see, there was a growing divide between the Hebraic Jews (Jews of the homeland who spoke Hebrew) and the Hellenized Jews (Jews influenced by Greek culture and who primarily spoke Greek; Jews of the diaspora).

Q. What was the source of division?

Acts 6:1 (NIV, Emphasis Mine)

1 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews **because** their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

NOTE 2 – This became such an issue that the twelve apostles themselves intervened to address the circumstance:

Acts 6:2 (NIV)

2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.

NOTE 3 – The apostolic band did not consider such work (i.e., the waiting of tables) to be beneath them. Such an attitude would run contrary to the words of their Lord (Matt. 20:26b–27): “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.” Yet the apostles knew that their service to Christ would require a sense of priority, and they needed to major on the majors. They would commit themselves to the ministry of the Word and to prayer (Acts 6:2, 4). Yet a remedy was needed!

Q. What was their remedy?

A. The selection and appointment of the first deacons.

Acts 6:3–4

3 “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

QUOTE – “The Apostles [met] the crisis with singular tact and moderation. They [did] not resent the suspicion; they [were] not careful to vindicate themselves against it. They remembered, it may be, the precedent presented by the life of Moses (Exod. 18:25), and they [acted], as he had . . . by delegating part of their authority to others.”

Q. How did the community of faith respond to their direction?**Acts 6:5–7 (Emphasis Mine)**

5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose **Stephen**, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

QUOTE – “The seven who were chosen all [bore] Greek names, and it is a natural, though not a necessary, inference, that they were all of the Hellenistic section of the Church, either because that section had a majority, or because the Hebrews generously voted for giving them special representatives of their own. The order of names may represent the actual order of election, Stephen obtaining the largest number of votes, and so on.”

KEY – Let us begin to hone in upon the figure of Stephen (having set the context for his appearing in the Word)!

CHARACTER

Q. How does the biblical record characterize Stephen?

A1. He is characterized as being full of the Spirit. Being full of the Holy Spirit was a requirement for consideration:

Acts 6:3a, 5 (Emphasis Mine)

3 “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are **known** to be **full of the Spirit** . . .”

5 They chose **Stephen, a man full of** faith and of **the Holy Spirit** . . .

NOTE 1 – To be full of the Spirit was and remains to be “eminently under the influence and power of the Spirit.” A person who is full of the Holy Spirit is one “upon whom the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit [are] evidenced.”

A2. He is characterized as being full of wisdom. Being full of wisdom was also a requirement for consideration:

Acts 6:3 (Emphasis Mine)

3 “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are **known to be full of** the Spirit and **wisdom.**”

NOTE 2 – Those who are full of wisdom possess prudence, “to manage affairs connected with their office.” Wisdom is indispensable in the faithful discharge of the duty entrusted to the officers of the church of the Lord.

A3. The text also presents Stephen as a man “full of faith” (even though such was not an apostolic requirement):

Acts 6:3–5a (Emphasis Mine)

3 “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man **full of faith** . . .

NOTE 3 – Clearly, he abounded in that most beautiful and precious of virtues: faith; a man of heavenly conviction!

COMMITMENT TO THE WORK OF THE LORD

Q. What else does this passage and beyond reveal about Stephen?

A. I posit that this passage reveals Stephen to be a man of commitment to the work of the Lord!

NOTE 1 – Consider the work that Stephen was both elected and commissioned to fulfill: the “waiting of tables.”

NOTE 2 – You see, this was not an attractive post per se. This was not something that young boys dreamed of: “Oh, I cannot wait for the day when I get to distribute food to widows in need [while “greater” tasks abound]!” But we see no shrinking back from Stephen; no removing his name from consideration; just willingness to serve. The Body of Christ Jesus has always needed men and women who are willing to serve in “non-luxurious” roles!

QUOTE – “Most people wish to serve God -- but in an advisory capacity only.”

ILL – During World War II, England needed to increase its production of coal. Winston Churchill called together labor leaders to enlist their support. At the end of his presentation he asked them to picture in their minds a parade which he knew would be held in Piccadilly Circus after the war. First, he said, would come the sailors who had kept the vital sea lanes open. Then would come the soldiers who had come home from Dunkirk and then gone on to defeat Rommel in Africa. Then would come the pilots who had driven the Luftwaffe from the sky. Last of all, he said, would come a long line of sweat-stained, soot-streaked men in miner's caps. Someone would cry from the crowd, 'And where were you during the critical days of our struggle?' And from ten thousand throats would come the answer, 'We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal.'" Not all the jobs in a church are prominent and glamorous. But it is often the people with their "faces to the coal" who help the church accomplish its mission.

QUOTE – “Whatever is done for God, without respect of its comparative character as related to other acts, is service, and only that is service. Service is, comprehensively speaking, doing the will of God. He is the object. All is for Him, for His sake, as unto the Lord, not as unto man. Hence, even the humblest act of the humblest disciple acquires a certain divine quality by its being done with reference to Him.”

Q. Might this be why Stephen expanded beyond the bounds of the tables he served?

Acts 6:8–10

8 Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. 10 But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

COUNTENANCE

KEY – Of course, the exaltation of Stephen amidst heavenly service would be met with corresponding opposition.

Acts 6:8–10 (Emphasis Mine)

8 Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. 9 **Opposition arose**, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. 10 **But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.**

NOTE 1 – He proved indomitable in the ministry given Him by the Spirit. Yet the “enemy” does not easily relent:

Acts 6:11–14

11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” 12 So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

NOTE 2 – It is in this setting that we see something wonderful concerning Stephen and his relationship w/ God:

Acts 6:15 (Emphasis Mine)

15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, **and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.**

Q. What does this reveal? What does his countenance display?

A. This reveals Stephen as a man who knew the presence of the Lord!

NOTE 3 – You see, key biblical figures had experienced similar conditions to Stephen! Let us note rather quickly:

Exodus 34:29–35 (Emphasis Mine)

29 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his **face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.** 30 When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, **his face was radiant**, and they were afraid to come near him. 31 But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. 32 Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai. 33 When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. 34 But whenever he entered the Lord’s presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, 35 **they saw that his face was radiant.** Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord.

Matthew 17:1–2a (Emphasis Mine)

1 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 There he was **transfigured** before them. **His face shone like the sun . . .**

NOTE 4 – Stephen, like Moses and Christ J. before Him, was characterized by the presence and glory of the Lord!

COMPREHENSION

NOTE 1 – Of course, Stephen was not just characterized by character, commitment and heavenly countenance. Rather, it becomes quite clear that he possessed deep comprehension of the Word. Let us note this lengthy text:

Acts 7:1–50

1 Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?”

2 To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. 3 ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’

4 So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5 He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. 6 God spoke to him in this way: ‘For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. 7 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’ 8 Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

9 Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

11 Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. 12 When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. 13 On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family. 14 After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. 15 Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. 16 Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

17 As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. 18 Then ‘a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.’ 19 He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

20 At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. 21 When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. 22 Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

23 When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. 24 He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. 25 Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. 26 The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?’

27 But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? 28 Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' 29 When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

30 After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. 31 When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: 32 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

33 Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 34 I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.'

35 This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36 He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

37 This is the Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.' 38 He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

39 But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. 40 They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!' 41 That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. 42 But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

“Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings
forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?

43 You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek
and the star of your god Rephan,
the idols you made to worship.

Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

44 Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. 45 After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, 46 who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

48 However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

49 “Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord.

Or where will my resting place be?

50 Has not my hand made all these things?'

NOTE 2 – I recognize that this section was lengthy to read, but what does it reveal about this man, Stephen? Acts 7 reveals that he possessed an intimate knowledge of the Word and of the sacred history of his people. Please keep in mind that this was a spontaneous sermon (i.e., given in the moment with no preparation time), and yet we find a mastery of OT history and numerous texts! Did you know that in his message to the Sanhedrin, Stephen quotes Gen. 12:1; 15:13, 14; Exod. 1:8; 2:14; 3:5–8, 10; 32:1; Deut. 18:15; Amos 5:25–27; Isa. 66:1–2?

KEY – I recognize what Christ promised His own (Mark 13:11): “Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.” Yet I also believe that the Holy Spirit can only bring to remembrance what you have studied!

COURAGE

KEY – Acts 7 brings further insight into the character or nature of Stephen. In Christ, he had become courageous.

ILL – During his years as premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev denounced many of the policies and atrocities of Joseph Stalin. Once, as he censured Stalin in a public meeting, Khrushchev was interrupted by a shout from a heckler in the audience. “You were one of Stalin's colleagues. Why didn't you stop him?” “Who said that?” roared Khrushchev. An agonizing silence followed as nobody in the room dared move a muscle. Then Khrushchev replied quietly, “Now you know why.”

NOTE 1 – It takes much to stand up and be counted, particularly against threat, adversity, hostility or persecution. Yet this is exactly what we see in Stephen before the Sanhedrin (i.e., the same body responsible for Jesus’ death):

Acts 7:51–53

51 “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

Q. What was the response of the Sanhedrin to his convicting words, spoken with great courage?

Acts 7:54–58

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” 57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

NOTE 2 – What we begin witness herein is the first martyrdom of the Church of Jesus Christ. It was not the last. However, I believe that this is why the text notes Christ standing at the right hand of God v. sitting (v. 55b): Christ Himself rose to recognize and welcome the first to die for faith in His Name. Such courage must be noted! Yet there is more to the story, and more to Stephen, born of this text. Let us continue with the following segment:

CONFORMITY UNTO THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

NOTE 1 – I believe the following selection reveals that Stephen had been truly conformed to the image of Christ:

Acts 7:59–60 (Emphasis Mine)

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.**” 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “**Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Q. Who does this sound like?

A. These words of Stephen mirror those of Christ Himself!

Acts 7:59b [Stephen]

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Luke 23:46a [Jesus]

46 Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Acts 7:60b [Stephen]

“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

Luke 23:34 [Jesus]

34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

NOTE 2 – Something incredible happens when a person abides in the Lord for some time. They become like Him.

Romans 8:29a (Emphasis Mine)

29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be **conformed** to the image of his Son . . .

QUOTE – [re: the Greek term] *symmorphos* – “conformed, by sharing the same inner essence-identity; showing similar behavior from having the same essential nature; fashioned like unto.”

Q1. Is this not what we see in Stephen?

Q2. Is this not what should be seen in us?

ILL – On a wall near the main entrance to the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas, is a portrait with the following inscription: “James Butler Bonham--no picture of him exists. This portrait is of his nephew, Major James Bonham, deceased, who greatly resembled his uncle. It is placed here by the family that people may know the appearance of the man who died for freedom.” No literal portrait of Jesus exists either. But the likeness of the Son who makes us free can be seen in the lives of His true followers.

COMMITMENT TO THE LORD OF THE WORK

NOTE 1 – As I close, we see that Stephen was not just committed to the work of the Lord (i.e., opening point). Rather, he was committed unto the Lord of the work, even unto the pint of death at the hands of his adversaries:

Acts 7:54–60

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, **he fell asleep.**

NOTE 2 – The day will come when those who sleep (i.e., are dead) in Christ shall raise unto Him by His power. We who believe live by the following promise, outlined by the apostle Paul to the ancient church at Thessalonica:

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 (Emphasis Mine)

13 Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who **sleep in death**, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. 14 For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

NOTE 3 – The ending of Stephen’s life on this earth is not the end of this story. Death is only a glorious beginning!

QUOTE – “Death is not extinguishing the light from the Christian; it is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.”

SUMMATIONS

KEY – I have shared with you seven critical aspects of this figure named Stephen, who appears in Acts 6 and 7:

- 1)** Character (Full of the Holy Spirit, Wisdom and Faith)
- 2)** Commitment to the Work of the Lord (Humble, Selfless Service)
- 3)** Countenance (Stephen was Characterized by the “Presence “of the Lord)
- 4)** Comprehension (Stephen Possessed a Vast, Deep Knowledge of the Word of God)
- 5)** Courage (Stephen Was a Man of Conviction Who Fearlessly Proclaimed the Message of God)
- 6)** Conformity (Stephen Evidenced Profound Similarity to the Person, Being and Nature of the Lord Jesus)
- 7)** Commitment to the Lord of the Work (He Remained Committed to Christ Even Unto Death)

Q. What do we need today?

A. Believers who will emulate this man!

Q1. Yet what hinders us or gets in the way?

Q2. Why don't we function as witnesses like Stephen?

FYI – These are questions we shall explore in a new multi-part series. Will it be easy? No. Yet will it be profitable?

CONCLUSION

NOTE 1 – I would call you to worship the Lord through your giving. Feel free to give online or in person.

NOTE 2 – Please check out our website for any of our beyond-Sunday ministries (e.g., MM; WM; CYC).

NOTE 3 – Potluck Supper next week after Service. Please feel free to bring a dish and bring a friend!

Numbers 6:24–26

24 The LORD bless you
and keep you;

25 the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;

26 the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace.