

Stephen Your Witness

by Tom Macartney

Stephen's witness and vision reveal the true nature of Christianity as a living relationship with Christ and a new creation entered by new birth.

Scripture: Acts 6:8, Acts 7:55, Acts 7:59, Acts 8:1, Acts 11:19, Colossians 3:1, Hebrews 12:1

Topics: "Christian Witness", "New Creation"

Description

Tom Macartney preaches about the significance of Stephen in the Bible, highlighting his role as a key witness in Acts and a vital link in God's plan, impacting Paul's life and ministry. Stephen's vision of Christ in glory and as Head of His church reveals the true nature of Christianity as God's new creation, emphasizing the importance of understanding and embracing the heavenly vision. Through Stephen's witness, we learn about the situation in the church in the New Testament and the tragic confusion in church history, urging us to be the Lord's witnesses and evaluate the quality of our own witness.

Transcript

All that we know of Stephen is found in two chapters, and two more verses, in the book of the Acts, and yet he was among the most important of the Lord's servants in the Bible. In many ways he is the Lord's key witness in Acts, and the key to the book itself with its brief outline of the expansion of the church. Stephen was also the key to Paul's life and ministry, and really his spiritual father in the Lord. And we must ever remember that it was Paul, with his fellow-worker Luke, who, in God's sovereignty, wrote half the New Testament. All this points to Stephen's importance as a vital link in God's plan. (chapters 6 and 7; 11:19; 22:20).

Stephen means a crown - his was a truly kingly character. His likeness to the Lord Jesus, in life and in death, is impressive. He suddenly appears on the scene like Elijah, fulfils his brief ministry, and, like Elijah, is gone in a cloud of glory. He was sent by the Lord like a spiritual thunderbolt to liberate His church from the dangerous cul-de-sac it was in.

Now, if we should wonder as to the relevance of all this to ourselves today, we shall soon see that Stephen provides us with a vital key to understanding, (i) the situation in the church in the NEW TESTAMENT, and (ii) the tragic confusion which runs through the whole of church history. Further, by understanding Stephen's witness, and the secret of it, we shall better understand what it means for us to be the Lord's witnesses (Acts 1:8), and be able to check up on the validity and quality of our own witness.

The background to Stephen's witness

(a) The situation in the church before Stephen. When reading Acts 1-5 we might get the impression that the events recorded there happened in a matter of days, or months at most, but the period covered is several years - commentaries vary considerably from about 3 to 6 years. We must remember that the Acts (as with other historical books in the Bible) only contains a God-chosen, selected history of some events, not a complete history of all events. This means that years after Pentecost, the church still consisted of Jewish Christians only, centred in Jerusalem. In spite of the command of the risen Lord to take the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), and the words of Peter quoting Joel, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all people" (2:17), the apostles and the church were still very largely locked up in Jerusalem. Of course, those from other lands, converted at Pentecost, had taken the gospel back with them; but no progress had been made with the great commission, because the apostles had not understood and faced up to the significance of the ascension and Pentecost with their far-reaching implications. Everything is in a narrow Jewish context - years after Pentecost (Acts 3:1; 5:12; 6:7). True, thousands were being saved as, "With great power the apostles gave their witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:33), but they were being saved into a 'Jews-only' church. The Hebrew Christians saw Israel at the centre of the divine purpose; for them Jesus was their Messiah, the king of Israel. But Stephen saw Him as the Son of Man on the throne of the universe. The title Son of Man in its apocalyptic aspect points to His coming in glory and universal reign (Dan. 7:13, 14; Matt. 16:27). The apostles preached the risen Lord, but they were slow to see (and reluctant to preach?) the implications of the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56). This would mean letting go the past (the temple and many other matters) and moving out of the old order into the new. Into this situation the Lord sent Stephen as a spiritual thunderbolt.

(b) Stephen's brief history. The manner in which Stephen appears in Acts chapter 6, is both surprising and instructive. In a time of revival the complaint of the Greek-speaking Jews (in the church) that the needs of their widows were being neglected is a sad revelation that all was not well between the two communities (the Greek-speaking Jews and the Hebrews). Further, did the attitude of the apostles have in it just a hint that this business was beneath them? Stephen accepted the humble ministry to which he was appointed and found it no hindrance to doing great wonders and signs among the people, and speaking in the synagogue as well. The fact is that Stephen was far ahead of the apostles in spiritual understanding at this time. They could teach and preach, "Jesus as the Christ ... exalted by God as Lord and Christ," in the power of the Spirit (Acts 5:42; 2:33, 36), but Stephen could also unfold the vast implications of the resurrection and ascension. All this is highly instructive. Note that six of the seven chosen were Greek-speaking Jews, and the seventh a proselyte from Antioch - this would have undercut the complaint. Note also that the Grecian Jews, having links with the lands of the dispersion, would, perhaps, have found it easier to accept the wider implications of the gospel than the Hebrews, those born in Palestine. This is instructive again, indicating how the influence of our temperaments and backgrounds must be watched. Stephen unfolded the implications of the ascension and Pentecost first in the synagogue (he may well have encountered Paul here), and then before the Sanhedrin (Paul must surely have been present; who else would have known what Stephen said?). He had seen that the old order, embodied in the law and the temple, must now give way to the reality which they foreshadowed (Heb. 8:5; 10:1). It was his vision and proclamation of it, "Behold, I see ... the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God," that cost him his life. (Was Paul in charge of the execution?). The throne is always linked with the cross. To what Stephen saw and said, we shall presently return

(c) The situation in the church after Stephen. The martyrdom of Stephen, witnessed and approved of by Paul, was the signal for a great persecution and scattering of the church from Jerusalem into Judaea, Samaria and Galilee, and as far as Antioch which presently became the centre of divine activity (Acts 8:1; 9:31; 11:19-26). We read of Philip's ministry in Samaria and to the Ethiopian treasurer, of Saul's murderous persecution of the church and conversion on the road to Damascus, of Peter's tour through Lydda, Sharon and Joppa, culminating in the epoch-making conversion of Cornelius at Caesarea. This confronted the church in Jerusalem with the implications of what Stephen had so clearly seen. Acts 11:19-26 tells of the great break-through to the Gentiles at Antioch, and shows how, through Stephen, the Lord had opened a door for His on-going, wider purposes, to be fulfilled in New Testament times largely through Paul.

What did Stephen see and say?

The heart of what Stephen saw and said is found at the end of his address and explanation of his witness before the Sanhedrin, so we will start with this. First we read, "But Stephen, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, Behold I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." Then, later, "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon the Lord, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 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. And Saul was consenting to his death." We must concentrate here on essentials. Stephen was granted in his hour of supreme crisis a glimpse into heaven itself. But he had already seen with the eyes of his heart (Eph. 1:18), that is, he had understood by the Holy Spirit's illumination the glorious meaning of the ascension. "God had shined into his heart, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," as Paul puts it, and was soon to experience for himself on the Damascus road (2 Cor. 4:6). Stephen saw, "The glory of God and Jesus ... the Son of Man ... the Lord Jesus ... standing at the right hand of God," the place of authority (Matt. 28:18). He saw, the Lord Jesus, the God-Man, "The visible image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), the One in whom all God's purposes in man's creation and redemption are realised. He saw a glorified Man on the throne of God and of the universe. (Lack of this perception seems to be a serious deficiency in theology generally. In seeking to safeguard the deity of Christ the theologians have failed to see and do justice to the full significance of His glorified manhood in its uniqueness and perfection.)

Stephen had understood why the Lord's favourite name for Himself (as recorded in the gospels) was Son of Man, and Stephen alone in the New Testament uses this title of Him (apart from the crowd's query in John 12:34). Further, Stephen alone addresses Him as Lord Jesus, the One who is both God and Man. Yes, Stephen had seen, "The throne of God and of the Lamb ... the Lamb in the midst of the throne." at the heart of the universe (Rev. 22:1; 5:6; 7:17). And he had understood something of the meaning of all these names and titles. No wonder it is recorded that when Stephen was brought before the council they saw, "His face as it had been the face of an angel." This must surely mean that Stephen's face shone with the reflected glory of his Lord whom he was seeing throughout this whole momentous occasion (Matt. 17:2; 2 Cor. 3:18).

Before considering these implications further, let us consider why the Lord Jesus is seen standing at the right hand of God. In every other reference in the New Testament (except two, where it would be safe to assume it) it is expressly stated that He is seated. Various interpretations are given, but we may safely say that, at the very least, the Lord Jesus is standing here, in the supreme court of heaven, to confirm and vindicate Stephen's witness, to be his helper in his hour of need, and to greet him as His first martyr. It has

been well said, "The dying Stephen saw the standing Christ".

The significance and implications of Stephen's vision and witness

(i) For Israel and its leaders.

In his address to the Sanhedrin (of which we surely have only an outline), Stephen shows the essentially temporary nature and the limitations of the old covenant and order, the continual failure of the people to obey their God, and their rejection of His servants, culminating in the rejection of His Son. Stephen underlines the limitations of the law and the temple, and of Israel itself. Consider these three verses from the New Testament: "The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). "The Most High dwells not in houses made with hands" (Acts 7:48). "He is not a Jew who is one outwardly ... he is a Jew who is one inwardly" (Rom. 2:28, 29).

It is clear that the Jews in general had misunderstood their calling and the purpose of it. Abraham was called, and through him Israel formed as a nation, to serve God's purposes in bringing redemption to a fallen race. Because God so loved the world, He chose Israel to be His servant among the nations in preparing a way for His Son to come to be the Saviour of the world (John 4:42). Further, they had forgotten that His purpose for them had never been fulfilled in Israel as a nation but only in a faithful remnant. The calling of Israel was only to be the means to God's end, not the end itself. Israel is not central in God's thinking and plan, but only apart of His strategy. At the centre of God's eternal purpose is His Son and His church. This is what Stephen was really saying.

(ii) For the Church and its leaders in New Testament times.

It was to be expected that the Jews and their leaders would reject Stephen's witness, but the sad fact is that many of the Jewish Christians also neither understood nor accepted it. They saw Christianity as an extension of Judaism, not as its fulfilment. The militants (the Judaizers) hounded Paul all through his life, insisting that Gentile converts would have to become Jews (through circumcision and several other things) if they were to be Christians (see Galatians), but the majority went their own way, setting up churches for Jews only. So this tragic tension and division persisted all through New Testament times. By seeing the Lord Jesus as the Son of Man at the right hand of God, Stephen knew that He was the Saviour and King of the whole world, not just the Jews' Messiah. Peter and the apostles preached the risen Christ, but, initially, in an essentially Jewish context. In Acts 1:6 they were still talking about the Lord restoring the kingdom to Israel. It took them years to see the purpose of God concerning His Son and His church (Eph. 1:22, 23; 3:10, 11). Consider the implications of, (a) Peter's lack of understanding over Cornelius (Acts 10; Gal. 2:11f), and, (b) the hopelessly compromised position of James and the Jerusalem church, on Paul's visit, circa 25 years after Pentecost (Acts 21). If the teaching of Paul on the new creation in Christ, and the nature, calling and functioning of the church is the inspired word of God (which it surely is), then those in New Testament times and since who have thought and taught differently must, sadly, be considered harmfully mistaken (Gal. 3:27, 28; 6:15, 16; 4:26; Col. 3:10, 11; Eph. 2:15, 16). Put concisely, Paul and James cannot both be right about the church. James's letter is scripture, but his position as a kind of presiding bishop in the Jerusalem church, and the denominational (Jews-only) position of the church itself (and others like it) were tragically mistaken. The fact that the Bible is the word of God does not mean that every word and action of everyone recorded there is necessarily right. A man's teaching, under God, may be inspired scripture, but his actions sometimes mistaken. Did Paul himself compromise his true position (quite sincerely) in Acts 21?

Paul (and Stephen) saw the nature of the church as a spiritual organism, the body of Christ, with Him as Head - a new creation, a new humanity, in which there could not be Jews or Gentiles or divisions of any kind. A Jewish or Gentile or denominational church is therefore ruled out.

It would seem that while Peter and John came to see what Paul (and Stephen) saw so clearly, James never did. Good man though he was, he never understood the significance of, "the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God". It has been said that James represented Christianity within Judaism, a Judaic type of Christianity. He certainly tried to do this, but, of course, true Christianity is the fulfilment (and ultimately the end) of Judaism, not just an expression of it. James did not see this. It is significant that in his letter (to Jewish Christians) there is no reference to the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection or the ascension, all of which lie at the heart of Christianity. James's most important contribution was the clarity with which he saw that morality undergirds true spirituality, that practical holiness of life is a touch-stone of true Christianity, which is why his letter is in the Scriptures - and how badly we need his emphasis on righteousness today. The Lord always uses all His servants as far as their knowledge of Himself reaches, however limited that understanding may be. This is how He used James and how we should see him.

The arrangement made between Paul and the three, James, Peter and John in Galatians 2 to go their separate ways in their ministries, was in reality a regrettable compromise, which meant a divided church, as seen in those addressed in some New Testament letters. This compromise must be seen as lying within the permitted will of God, as so much does in church history, and never as meaning His approval.

Of course, the Lord's starting point at Pentecost had to be in Jerusalem with Jews, but it was never His will that His church should be divided into Jewish and Gentile churches (or in any other way). The first Jewish believers should soon have been emancipated from the old into the new order in Christ and His church, the fulfilment of their past, forming one new man with the Gentiles (Eph. 2:11-22). Note: Paul, while taking the gospel to the Jew first in their synagogues, because they should have been prepared for it, did not set up Jewish churches on his journeys (though he found some established by others Phil. 1:14-18). Was Paul restrained by the Lord from going North or West in Acts 16:6-8 partly because of the churches linked with Peter in this area (1 Pet. 1:1)? Of course, Peter had come to understand and share Paul's vision of the church by the time he wrote his first letter, as chapter 2:1-10 shows.

(iii) For our understanding of the Church in the New Testament and in church history.

The seriousness of this situation in the New Testament is not generally understood, it would seem. It weakened the church's testimony in the world, held many Christians back from maturity in Christ (consider the letter to the Hebrews), and provided a springboard for still further and greater confusion in the church's history down the centuries. These divisions, denominations and diversions from the divine plan all have their origins in the New Testament church. Failure to share Stephen's and Paul's heavenly vision is always at the root of these problems. Ironically, the situation in the New Testament is used by some to justify the confusion today, as if denominations are part of the divine plan!

Some may say that it is unreasonable to expect the Hebrew Christians to abandon their Old Testament heritage. However, the issue for them was not forsaking this, but entering into its fulfilment in the new covenant and creation in Christ. The law had been fulfilled in Him; the temple fulfilled in God's spiritual temple, the church; the Spirit had now come (as foretold by the prophets) to establish the reality of the new creation; the true circumcision was of the heart and, for the Christian, was fulfilled through union with Christ in the cross (Gal. 8:14, 15). The letter to the Hebrews contains a final and conclusive exposition of

Christianity as the fulfilment of Judaism, and an appeal to those still clinging to the past, before the end of Old Judaism with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The real issue is, 'What is the will of God in this matter?' In the light of John 17, for example, or the clearest teaching in Paul's letters (in particular) concerning the church of God, is it possible to accept as part of the divine plan the division between Jewish and Gentile churches in the New Testament and the appalling and growing confusion found in church history? Surely not. The fact that the Lord has been pleased to transcend (in measure) the chaos we have created, surely does not excuse the tragedy, but only magnifies His grace and power. While He will certainly achieve His goal in the end, a glorious church, let us be under no illusions that this will be without much loss to us. Many tears may be shed at the judgment seat of Christ, if we find we have grieved, misunderstood, or failed Him, missed His best for our lives or lessened our future usefulness.

Further and wider implications

Stephen's vision of Christ in glory and as Head of His church also revealed the true nature of Christianity as God's new creation.

True Christianity is for the individual a living relationship with Christ; it is not a system of religious beliefs to be held and practised. It involves us in a new creation entered by new birth, a work of the Holy Spirit giving us eternal life and a new nature. True Christianity is rooted in the grace of God, which makes possible everything He requires of us. The true Christian life consists not in a constant struggle to do His will, but a divine enabling to do it. We are conformed to His likeness not by imitation, but by reproduction, by the Holy Spirit working in us, through faith and obedience. (The same principle applies to the building of the church - He alone can build His church.) The true Christian life is essentially an inward life of fellowship with the Lord Jesus, and so with fellow Christians in Him. It does not depend on outward things such as buildings, music or forms of worship (however beautiful), services and ceremonies (however impressive), and so on, (which may satisfy our temperaments). It is a deeper work of the Holy Spirit in our spirits whereby we are occupied and satisfied with the Lord alone.

In the new creation in Christ everything comes down from heaven, from God; everything originates with Him and is sustained and governed by Him, not by men (John 3:5-7; Rev. 21:2). In this new humanity that God is creating in His image, "Christ is everything and Christ is in everyone" (Col. 3:9-11). The problem in the New Testament church illustrates, in some respects, the deeper and universal problem found in fallen human nature, the problem of false religion of every kind, and its fascination for and grip upon the race. Fallen man simply has to have some substitute for the living and true God he has forsaken. This is what the prophets had to contend with, religion without reality, a form of godliness without its power, religion without Christ. We must escape from this natural religion rooted in our fallen natures, shown, for example, in our liking for religious externals, into spiritual reality, the realm of the Spirit. Even the unsaved often enjoy going to church, without seeking the Lord. All through church history we have a clash between, (i) truth and tradition, between the Scriptures in their clarity as explained to the humble heart by the Holy Spirit, and human interpretations of and additions to the Scriptures, including exclusive and contradictory Biblical systems which confuse and divide Christians; (ii) heavenly and earthly views of Christianity and the church, between seeing the church as a living organism, a body with a head, and institutional Christianity. This is seen in the way things from the Old Testament which belong to Israel are mistakenly carried over into the church, for example, state churches - set services - distinctions between clergy and laity, pulpit and pew - and so on; (iii) a church which is separated from this world, whose calling is to witness and proclaim the gospel, and a church which is linked with this fallen world and vainly trying to transform it into the kingdom of God. Christians, as individuals, may be called to witness in many spheres

and ways (including caring ministries), but the church as such, as a body, is not called to social action, but to proclaim the gospel which alone can deal with the root of all human problems. Its message is not a call to reformation, but a call to repentance and faith (Acts 20:21), to new birth into a new creation (John 3).

Stephen's vision of the ascended Lord Jesus set him free from false ideas and led him into the truth. This is our need today (John 8:32).

The heart of the matter for us today

At the beginning of this study we noted Stephen's likeness to Christ - his vision was the secret of this. As our high calling is to be conformed to the likeness of God's Son (Rom. 8:29), and this transformation is accomplished by our beholding the glory of the Lord and the inworking of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18), let us close by considering this.

(i) We note first that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:55a), that is, he was living under the full control of the Spirit, and that the chief work of the Spirit is to open our eyes to the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ: "He looked up steadfastly into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus" (Acts 7:55b). The work of the Spirit is to glorify Christ and show us what is ours in Him (John 16:14). Stephen's vision gripped him as he realised that he was called and destined to be like this Son of Man; that he had been created and was now being re-created to be like Him, as he realised something of the wonderful purpose of creation and redemption. (We note, in passing, that being full of the Holy Spirit is considered to be the normal experience of all Christians (Acts 6:3). We note too, that this is not the same as spiritual maturity. A new-born Christian should be full of life, but cannot be mature. Like Stephen, Peter was full of the Spirit, but far behind him in spiritual understanding. Not to be confused.)

(ii) We note that being full of the Holy Spirit included being full of grace, power, faith and wisdom (Acts 6:3, 5, 8). We note Stephen's deep knowledge and understanding of the word. In him we see both the graciousness and the power of God in his address to the Sanhedrin, courtesy at the beginning, directness and honesty at the end, yet with the face of an angel. No diplomatic double-talk with Stephen, but speaking the truth in love. Irresistible, God-given wisdom in the synagogue and before the Sanhedrin, and faith to die a martyr's death.

(iii) We note Stephen's close fellowship with his Lord: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and his appeal for his murderers, and his mastery of death, and when he had said this, he fell asleep." How like His master he was! Who can measure the shattering effect of such a scene upon Paul? Surely, Paul must then have known that he was on the wrong side. Stephen had prepared the way for Paul's capitulation on the Damascus road.

Paul's likeness to Stephen and so to Christ is a further study in itself. Consider Paul's conversion, recorded three times in the Acts (chapters 9, 22 and 26). Consider their sufferings - both were stoned. Consider how Paul expands and explains what Stephen saw and said. Their vision was the same, and the same as that of which the prophets had a glimpse and spoke - Isaiah (6:1-5; John 12:41), Jeremiah (17:12), Ezekiel (1:26-28) and Daniel too (Dan. 7:13, 14), and, of course, John (Rev. 4:2, 3; 5:6); all had the same vision for there is only one throne, the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. 22:1).

This then is the heart of the matter, to keep the eyes of our hearts looking steadfastly into heaven, seeing Him whom Stephen saw, living in the power of His resurrection, being guided and governed by and obedient to the heavenly vision, and so being transformed into His likeness (Col. 3:1-4; Heb. 12:1, 2).

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