

Stephen: Then and Now

Stephen was the first Christian martyr, the first to die because of Jesus, one of the first officers in the church because of his appointment as a deacon in the Jerusalem church. He died for preaching the Gospel.

That is the way we view him now but the things mentioned above were not all true of him as he really was portrayed in Acts. My aim in this essay is not to detract from the heroic greatness of Stephen but to illustrate how our understanding is so often made to conform to a modern template of tradition and inaccuracies.

Being of Greek heritage, his name must have been, or derived from, Stephanus. So the “ph” would be pronounced as an “f” instead of a “v” as we pronounce it.

He was not the first to die because of Jesus. Think of all the male children Herod ordered killed in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16f).

Stephen was not the first believer in Jesus to be martyred. That distinction goes to John the Baptist (Matt. 14:1-12).

Was Stephen a “Christian” martyr? If someone had asked him if he was a Christian, he in puzzlement might well have inquired, “What is one of those -- a Christian?” The disciples were first called Christians about 43 A.D about ten years after Pentecost (Acts 20:6). It was an appellation laid on them by Gentiles. Unbelieving Jews would not have applied the name of their Messiah to them. And there is no record of a disciple ever claiming to be a Christian, calling another disciple a Christian, or giving instructions as to how to become a Christian.

Paul referred to Stephen as a witness (Acts 22:20). The Greek word “martus” from which we get our word “martyr” simply means “witness.” Paul’s use of the word was before it was given a special connotation in English of “one who bears witness *by his death.*”

Those who were saved from their sins in Jerusalem were God’s “ekklesia,” those *called out* into his assembly or congregation. They became a group of associated people rather than an organization which they joined or were added to. Organizations have pyramids of authority with designated offices. Jesus had said that such would not be the case among his disciples (Luke 22:24-26). Was Stephen appointed to an office of authority? He was appointed to do a function. Was he the first on a board of deacons? His name was first on a list of seven men appointed to do a certain work (Acts 6:5). Were they the authoritative officers over all activities other than preaching? Their function was to oversee the distribution of care for the Grecian widows. How long would that appointment last? Until the job was done. They were not a permanent board who would also take care of building and grounds and count the contribution.

Was Stephen a deacon? No elders were mentioned. Their appointment was under the direction of the twelve. Can we have deacons without elders? Must deacons serve “under” elders? Can you not see that we try to impose an organizational authority to normal functions? Elders are not needed in order for a group to appoint men and women to serve needs of the group even as elders are not needed for a group to appoint men to serve as shepherds of their group. When they are appointed, they are not set as authoritative officers in an organization but as spiritual caretakers of other brothers and sisters.

The Catholic Church developed a pyramid of authoritative offices in creating a rigid organization. Some of this concept was inherited in Reformation churches so that churches today still form with officers and organizational structure. That concept affected translations of the Scriptures so that misleading words like “church”, “office”, and “deacon” have been employed to perpetuate the practices. Stephen was a deacon if we understand that he was a servant/minister in a community of disciples as the word implies, but he was not a deacon if we understand it to be an office in organized religion.

One of my favorite lessons in earlier years was about “Jerusalem: the Model Church.” Did Stephen serve in a model church? Did it set the pattern for all time? If your congregation is modeled after the Jerusalem church, it will need apostles to oversee and lay hands on appointees, and it will consist of a community of the saved meeting in many house groups.

Was Stephen stoned for preaching? There are two Greek words translated “preach.” One means to evangelize which is to tell the good news of salvation through Christ. The other means to herald or proclaim. Neither word is used in referring to Stephen. We are introduced to his great speech simply by “And Stephen said..” (Acts 7:1). This speech was not in a synagogue or a church building or on a hillside. It was not preceded by three songs and a prayer for it was done in a trial in a courtroom before the council presided over by the high priest. He was accused of teaching that Jesus would destroy the temple. He declared that God did not dwell in their temple. That was too much, so they cut his speech short and killed him.

Although Stephen did not mention Jesus by name, he quoted prophecies alluding to him. He was introducing them to the Good News. So, in that sense, he was preaching a gospel sermon, evangelizing, heralding the Christ without mentioning his name or the church or calling for them to be baptized. Had his proclamation not been interrupted, many might have responded as others had done on Pentecost.

The points I have raised here are neither earth-shaking nor life-threatening, yet they may cause us to be aware of our need to look beneath the dimming overlay of tradition and commonly accepted interpretations and practices to see truth anew. Such misconceptions as we have mentioned are certainly not limited to matters relating to Stephen.

When we think we are free of all such warping of truth, we may need to take another look at ourselves. I just read this (unattributed) observation that may apply: “Egotism is the anesthetic that dulls the pain of stupidity.” []

(Cecil Hook; March 2005. Due to other pressing things I need to do, I may skip some weeks. So do not assume my demise prematurely!)

Talkin’ Texas: The name of one county in the Texas Panhandle bordering New Mexico accentuates the handicap of the man it honors. It is Deaf Smith County. This deaf man commanded Sam Houston’s scouts at the battle of San Jacinto. I am unable to find what his first name was. I think I remember it but I am not sure.