

Chapter 16: Full of Grace and Power

Acts 6:8–15

So far, the church has sustained two advances of persecution, although no one has yet lost their life. As we come to the story of Stephen, the intensity of persecution increases to the point of death for bearing faithful witness for Jesus Christ. In Acts 6:8–15, we find the brief story of Stephen's actions that lead up to this persecution. In much greater detail, however, we read about the false, underhanded tactics of those who seek to silence Stephen and the gospel of Jesus that Stephen proclaims. As the gospel continues to advance, the hatred of the world continues to grow, since *the gospel of Jesus threatens the authority of the world*.

Grace and Power (Acts 6:8)

In the list of the first deacons, Stephen had received first mention, along with a short statement about his qualifications for office: “they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5). In this phrase, we see that Stephen was both equipped by God for the office, and also that the congregation recognized the fact by calling him to serve in this capacity. Lenski notes that here again “Luke draws attention to the spiritual qualifications of Stephen” by both the statement about his character (“full of grace and power”) as well as his actions: “Stephen is the first man in addition to the apostles to perform miracles, ‘great wonders and signs,’ the two terms being combined as usual (see 2:19).”¹ The Scriptures do not give a complete explanation as to why Stephen possessed power to work miracles, which we see usually reserved for the apostles alone.² We do read later that Philip served as an “evangelist” who “had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied” (Acts 21:8–9). The office of “evangelist” was closely tied to the work of the apostles (see the order of offices in Eph. 4:11; also, 2 Tim. 4:5), and it may be that Stephen functioned as an early evangelist beyond his role as a deacon.³

Regardless of *how* Stephen was associated with the apostles, *that* he was associated with the apostles is important for the narrative, since what happens to Stephen follows the same basic plot of what happened to Peter and John “in Acts 3–5: Stephen performs signs and wonders, he is arrested, and then he is interrogated by

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 249.

² Against the notion that he possessed this power through the apostolic laying on of hands, Bruce writes that, since Stephen “is described as ‘a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit’ at the time of his appointment (v. 5) and it seems reasonable to suppose that his fulness of the Spirit was manifested by these signs even before the apostles laid their hands on him for a special work.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 132–33.)

³ “Evangelists were extraordinary officers, suited to the infant state of the church, who were commissioned to travel under the direction and control of the apostles, that they might ordain ministers and settle congregations, according to the system laid down by Christ and his apostles.” (Thomas Smyth, *An Ecclesiastical Catechism of the Presbyterian Church: For the Use of Families, Bible-Classes, and Private Members* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1841), 39.)

the Sanhedrin.”⁴ Indeed, we must see Stephen’s treatment as an extension and intensification of the persecution against the apostles: “The narrative about Stephen constitutes a major turning point in Acts. It ends a series of three trials before the Sanhedrin. The first ended in a warning (4:21), the second in a flogging (5:40), and Stephen’s in his death.”⁵ Here, we see “that the Church was assaulted in the person of one man....For so soon as the force and grace of the Spirit doth show itself, the fury of Satan is by and by provoked.”⁶

Growing Persecution (Acts 6:9–14)

After such a short description of Stephen’s ministry, Luke tells us about a group that “rose up and disputed with Stephen” (v. 9). This group belonged to a particular synagogue (i.e., a Jewish precursor of the local church, where regular services were held for Scripture reading, study, preaching, and prayer, organized under the leadership of elders).⁷ This synagogue was composed largely of “Freedmen” (former slaves who had gained their freedom) who had come to Jerusalem from many places around the known world:

Cyrenians came from northern Africa, and the Alexandrians came from Egypt (Cyrenians: six times in the NT: Matt. 27:32; Mark 15:21 Luke 23:26; Acts 6:9–10; 11:20; 13:1; Alexandrians: Acts 6:9–10; 18:24). Cilicians came from the northeastern Mediterranean and areas such as Tarsus (eight times in the NT: Acts 6:9–10; 15:22–23, 41; 21:39; 22:2–5; 23:34–35; 27:4–5; Gal. 1:21–22).⁸

The connection between Cilicia and Tarsus is subtle but important, serving as an introduction to the figure of *Saul* of Tarsus: “Paul himself was a Cilician Jew who had come to live in Jerusalem, and it was Asian Jews who later would accuse him of having violated the temple (Acts 21:27f.). In fact, Paul himself may have attended this synagogue, and it may be there where he debated his fellow Greek-speaking Jews after becoming a Christian (Acts 9:29).”⁹ We are not told whether Saul was a member of this synagogue,¹⁰ or where exactly he became involved in Stephen’s case. We are told, however, that “Saul approved of [Stephen’s] execution” once the terrible deed was finished (Acts 8:1).

What, then, originally caused this particular group to rise up in opposition to Stephen? Although v. 8 told us only of the “great wonders and signs” that Stephen was performing, it is clear that he was also preaching and teaching about Jesus by the testimony of the false witnesses: “This man never ceases to speak words...” (v. 13). It is their *characterization* of Stephen’s words that was false, and not whether he had spoken.¹¹ Then, when given an opportunity to respond, Stephen preaches the longest recorded sermon in the Book of Acts (Acts 7:2–

⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, 341.

⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, 183.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:240.

⁷ Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1832), 29–48.

⁸ Bock, *Acts*, 270.

⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, 184–85.

¹⁰ Yet, this is a plausible conclusion: “The mention of Cilicia suggests that this may have been the synagogue which Saul of Tarsus attended in Jerusalem.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 133.)

¹¹ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 135–36. We will return to this point later in the study.

53). This work goes beyond the ministry of deacons, again suggesting that Stephen (like Philip) functioned as an early evangelist who assisted the apostles with more than serving tables.

The text is not clear about everything that led to Stephen's arrest. The only thing we can likely glean from the details of the text is that the grammar for the word *disputed* "indicates that these debates continued over a period of time, which suggests that these were (initially) not heated discussions but debates in which the pros and cons of the significance of Jesus for the Jewish people were considered."¹² While we are not given any direct words of Stephen before his trial, "it no doubt concerned the Messiahship of Jesus, but Stephen expounded the implications of His Messiahship more radically than his fellow-believers had hitherto expounded it. The nature of his argument may be inferred from the charges which were brought against him (vv. 13f.) and from his reply (Ch. 7)."¹³ As these Hellenistic Jews debated with him, they lost the debates for two reasons: "they could not withstand [first] the wisdom and [second] the Spirit with which he was speaking" (v. 10). That is, they could not refute the points he was making, and they also could not stand up against the force of character that was present from the power of the Holy Spirit, with whom he had been filled (Acts 6:3).

Because they failed in the course of their straightforward debates with him, they took up underhanded measures to silence him: "Then they secretly instigated men who said, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God'" (v. 11). Polhill plausibly suggests that the Hellenistic identity of these men that Luke gave us in v. 9 is important to understanding their motivations:

It may come as something of a surprise that the Diaspora Jews were so incensed at Stephen. As Hellenistic Jews, would they not have been more tolerant, more receptive of his new ideas, less nationalistic? No, the evidence is that exactly the opposite was the case. The Jews who came from the Diaspora were usually highly nationalistic Jews, having left their homes in the dispersion to migrate to the holy city, the temple city.... They would not at all have been open to Stephen's prophetic critique of their religion and worship. They were wrong in their charge of blasphemy, but blind zealotism is incapable of taking even the most constructive critique.¹⁴

We should notice, then, their zeal for "Moses and God": "This greatest Old Testament prophet and mediator of the covenant is combined with God as the object of one preposition which practically makes 'Moses and God' one concept; for whatever would be uttered against Moses would *eo ipso* be spoken also against God."¹⁵ On the basis of these charges, they also "stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes" to arrest Stephen and to bring him to trial before the Sanhedrin (v. 12).

Beyond echoing the trials of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin earlier in the book of Acts, this trial also echoes the trial of Jesus, especially with the "false witnesses" brought to bear testimony

¹² Schnabel, *Acts*, 346.

¹³ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 133.

¹⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 185.

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 253.

against Stephen: “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us” (vv. 13–14). Regarding this implicit comparison with Jesus’ trial, Bruce writes an important section that helps set up the nature of the sermon the Stephen will preach in the next chapter:

They are called “false witnesses,” as those who brought similar testimony against Jesus are called (Matt. 26:59–61; Mark 14:55–59). But in both cases the falseness of their testimony consisted not in wholesale fabrication but in subtle and deadly misrepresentation of words actually spoken....

Whatever form of words Stephen used which gave rise to the charge that he said Jesus the Nazarene would destroy the temple, it seems plain that he had not only repeated the words which Jesus Himself had spoken, but also grasped and expounded their inner meaning. The apostles and many of the rank and file of the Jerusalem church might continue to attend the temple services and be looked upon as devout and observant Jews; Stephen saw that the work of Christ logically involved the abrogation of the whole temple order and its supersession by a new edifice not made with hands, and yet within the main stream of OT revelation. Jesus Himself had said, “one greater than the temple is here” (Matt. 12:6); these and other sayings of His about the temple were apparently preserved by the early church in Jerusalem, but it was Stephen who appreciated their full force. The gospel meant the end of the sacrificial cultus and all the ceremonial law. These were the outward and visible signs of Jewish particularism, and could not be reconciled with the universal scope of the Christian message of salvation accomplished. This was the argument, pressed by Stephen in synagogue debate, which formed the real basis of the case for the prosecution.¹⁶

Even the fact of the trial is significant in its connection with Jesus, as Lenski observes:

One of the remarkable features of this story is the circumstance that these vicious and bloodthirsty Jews do not plan simply to capture and to kill Stephen without further ceremony. No; they plan on a trial, prepare witnesses, then secure Stephen and place him before the high court. They just *will* have the legal machinery! It was so in the case of Jesus. Although their motives were insincere and all the means criminal, this show of legal right seems in some way to hush their consciences.¹⁷

Stephen is not only like the apostles; he is also like his Master, Jesus Christ. As with Jesus, the world was unable to refute Stephen, so they conspire to kill him. They twist his words, but they nevertheless attempt to use legal processes in order to pull some veil of respectability over their sham proceedings. Nevertheless, the judgment has already been determined, even if not yet pronounced

¹⁶ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 135–36.

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 254.

and executed. Like Jesus, Stephen will now bear the good testimony for the sake of his Lord.

There is a lesson to learn here in terms of the church's witness in front of a watching world. Calvin draws two observations from this passage to remind us why we cannot reason with the world without expecting hostility and opposition. First—and for this we should be sympathetic—what we proclaim cannot be understood by the world, since the world does not possess the Holy Spirit to interpret spiritual truths (1 Cor. 2:14): “there be many things which are contrary to the reason of the flesh, men are inclined to nothing more than to admit false reports, which corrupt the true and sincere sense of doctrine.”¹⁸ Second, we are dealing not just with men, but with the great Enemy himself: “This malice of Satan, and the sleights, ought to make us more wary and more circumspect that no preposterous thing, or anything that is improperly spoken, escape us, wherewith they may be armed to fight against us; for we must carefully cut off from the wicked that occasion wherewith they snatch.”¹⁹ In light of these two warnings, Calvin presses the need for steadfast boldness in front of a hostile world:

And if we see that, doctrine, which is by us well and godly delivered, corrupted, deformed, and torn in pieces with false reports, we must not repent that we have begun, neither yet is there any cause why we should be more slack hereafter; for it is not meet that we should be flee from the poisoned and venomous bitings of Satan, which the Son of God himself could not escape. In the mean season, it is our part and duty to dash and put away those lies wherewith the truth of God is burdened, like as we see Christ free the doctrine of the gospel from unjust infamy. Only let us so prepare ourselves that such indignity and dishonest dealing may not hinder us in our course.²⁰

May Stephen's boldness—patterned off the example of our Lord Jesus Christ himself—continue to inspire our bold witness today.

Graceful Presence (Acts 6:15)

We will get further into Stephen's response in the next study; however, Luke gives us a brief statement to illustrate the boldness of Stephen in his peaceful countenance: “And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel” (v. 15). The word for “gazing” is important in the rest of Acts, as Bock observes: “They are looking intently (ἀτενίσσαντες, *atenisantes*) at him. The verb is used of how the Eleven observe Jesus as he ascends into heaven. How Stephen looks into heaven at the end of his speech, how Peter gives careful consideration to the vision he receives, and how Paul looks at the council when testifying (Acts 1:10–11; 3:4, 12; 6:15; 7:55–56; 10:4; 11:6; 13:9–10; 14:9–10; 23:1).”²¹ In spite of the rage of the world around him, Stephen was calmly prepared for what he was about to do. Lenski writes, “This was Stephen's supreme hour.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:244.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:244.

²⁰ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:244.

²¹ Bock, *Acts*, 274.

That Spirit now filled him to such an extent that his countenance shone with supernatural radiance, light, and power, which were comparable only to those that appear on an angel's countenance.”²²

Lenski also asks and answers an important question: “How did Luke know all this about Stephen? There were witnesses enough, and one especially, Luke's dearest friend Paul.”²³

Discussion Questions

1. What did we learn about Stephen in Acts 6:5? What do we learn about his character in v. 8? What do we learn about his deeds in v. 8? With whom was Stephen interacting “among the people” (i.e., those inside or outside the church)? Why do you think that we find so little information about Stephen's words and actions during this brief description of his ministry? Why do you think that the narrative focuses so much more on the rage of the world against him?
2. What is a synagogue (v. 9a)? What does it mean that the synagogue was composed of “freedmen” (v. 9b)? Where did the members of this citizen come from, in terms of a modern map (v. 9c)? Who may have been associated with the Cilicians (see Acts 8:1)? How do we see the opposition of Stephen growing incrementally here? What kind of underhanded tactics do these synagogue members employ? What is their main point of contention with Stephen (vv. 13–14)?
3. How does Stephen's trial before the Sanhedrin follow the pattern of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin? How does Stephen's trial before the Sanhedrin follow the pattern of the interrogations of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin? What do you think it means that Stephens “face was like the face of an angel” (v. 15)? How does his peace, grace, and bold confidence defy the danger and volatility of the situation?
4. What dangers do you face as you encounter opportunities to share the gospel with other people? What makes you the most anxious, and what fears are most likely to stop you from bold witness? How does the Holy Spirit empower Stephen in this passage? How might he empower you for bold witness? Where has the Lord put you for bearing witness boldly and gracefully to those who do not yet believe in Jesus?

²² Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 257.

²³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 257.