

Stephen - Thy Witness

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks' sermon on Stephen emphasizes the significance of his martyrdom as a call to embrace a spiritually authentic Christianity beyond traditional constraints.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 17:7, Amos 5:25-27, Luke 24:27, Acts 7:48-49, Acts 9:13, Acts 22:20, Acts 24:24, Acts 26:11, Acts 28:22, Hebrews 13:13

Topics: "Spiritual Christianity", "The Significance of Martyrdom"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of Stephen's martyrdom as a pivotal moment in spiritual Christianity, highlighting that Stephen's testimony revealed a deeper understanding of God's ongoing spiritual movement beyond the confines of traditional Judaism. Stephen's discourse illustrated the dangers of clinging to earthly systems and the necessity of embracing a spiritual reality that transcends physical temples and rituals. His bold stance against the Jewish hierarchy not only cost him his life but also ignited a division within early Christianity, challenging believers to choose between a semi-Judaistic faith and a fully spiritual one. The sermon calls for a re-examination of Christian practices in light of Stephen's insights, urging a return to a Christ-centered, Spirit-led faith.

Transcript

An Appeal for Spiritual Christianity

Acts 22:20 (Acts 6 & 7)

It would be difficult to find a Christian who did not hold Stephen in very high esteem. The reading of the account of his martyrdom, as that of a young man of great gifts and unimpeachable character, stirs every kind of emotion into intense reaction. Sorrow, grief, admiration, anger, contempt, hatred, are all mingled in the tears which are very near when we hear his last words and see his last look. Our heads go down when we seem to see in the darkness of the night the torches of the "devout men" and hear their hushed tread as they go out to recover and bury that mangled body - "And devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him". A young, brilliant, brave, and beautiful life has been taken away by brutal, vicious, bestial fury. The cause we shall examine, but view the event.

True, Stephen had flung some serious charges at the Jewish rulers present. He had supported those charges by long Jewish history and Scripture, but prejudice will never listen to the best documented argument. So, at a given point, they stopped their ears, gnashed at him with their teeth, and rushed upon

him, dragging him outside the city. The place for stoning was a ramp higher than a man. The first witness against Stephen threw him from the ramp in such a way that he fell on his back. Then a large stone was thrown with great force on his heart. The blow did not kill him, so, according to the Law (Deut. 17:7) it was the people's turn. The men took off their white mantles and laid them at the feet of Saul, who was present in an official capacity to support the proceedings. The stones rained upon Stephen who, at a point, raised himself to his knees and prayed for their forgiveness, and, as the horrible work reached its climax, he just said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." The deed was done. The mangled body lay motionless.

But, from that point, we have to begin our enquiry. What did it all amount to? What was

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STEPHEN?

Was Stephen just the first martyr for the faith, to be followed by many more, and so to be JUST ONE of the Noble Army of the Martyrs? Or was there something special and different about Stephen? We answer that in an affirmation, and then proceed to uncover that particular significance.

Stephen was making spiritual history. What Stephen was fighting for to the very death was something in Christianity that even the chief Apostles - Peter, James, John, and the rest - had not yet seen and come to. It was something different, even in Christianity.

That is the affirmation; now for the explanation. The explanation will be found, firstly in his own discourse, and then in what eventuated from his death.

1. STEPHEN'S DISCOURSE

In his discourse to the Jewish rulers and his other accusers, Stephen ranged the history of Israel with a single definite thought and object before him. He started with their racial or national father, Abraham, and went on through Isaac; Jacob; Joseph; Moses; the people - in Egypt; the Exodus; the Wilderness; Joshua; David; Solomon; the Prophets.

In what he had to say about all these, one feature and factor runs through all and was governing everything. That factor is that God is ever moving on, and that nothing but disaster can come to those who do not go on with Him. This going on of God, Stephen pointed out, was not just in the progress of history, even the history of a chosen people, it was more essentially a spiritual going on. To Abraham the command was "Get out"; and then, WHEN he was out, a life of pilgrimage to the end; no settling down or taking root. Stephen is quite detailed on this.

When, through Jacob, the national family and potentially the twelve tribes were secured and the possibility of a stop, an arrest, and death by famine was threatening, the continuance and going on was secured by Divine sovereignty as told in the fascinating story of the life of Joseph. From Joseph Stephen went on to Moses - his birth, preservation, education, escape, commission, and the Exodus. God was going on.

At this point some of the strongest and most terrible things are said by Stephen. He is dealing with Israel in the wilderness and he exposes the hidden causes of retarded progress.

Remember that progress is Stephen's subject: God was ever moving on and man ever contrary. Stephen indicates that the retarded progress and the extension of a few days into forty years was due to one thing; it was that, while they were out of Egypt, Egypt was not out of them. Not only were they ever literally looking back to Egypt and inclining to return there but the spirit and principle of idolatry was still strongly in

their hearts. This came out in the demand for the golden calf; but Stephen - quoting Amos - said something even more terrible, namely, that, in some mystic way, the very Tabernacle and Temple were, in their souls, associated with Moloch and Rephan - gods of the stellar bodies; and their sacrifices had the same subtle link. While ostensibly Jehovah was the object of worship, actually He was mixed up, in their worship, with other gods. If this is what Stephen meant and what Amos was actually dealing with when this thing in the heart had come out to find exposure in the latter days of the Monarchy, it fully justifies his charge of 'resisting the Holy Ghost'.

But Stephen goes on far beyond the wilderness with the same people. He touches lightly on Joshua, but implies the same spirit. We know that Joshua in type postulated God's movement, ever on, ever up: the going on to exploit the inheritance ever more fully. But, again, that incorrigible disposition to settle down too soon and not go on to fullness marked and marred the history of the conquest.

On Stephen goes to David and to Solomon. David's desire to build a house for God on earth received a very reserved and non-committal response from Him, and was met with the answer that God would build a house of a different order, for

"The Most High dwelleth not in houses made with hands...

The heaven is my throne,

And the earth the footstool of my feet:

What manner of house will ye build me? saith the Lord:

Or what is the place of my rest?

Did not my hand make all these things?". (Acts 7:48,49).

What Stephen saw, and what is stated, intimated, and implicit in the New Testament (a monumental document on the matter is 'the Letter to the Hebrews'), was that Solomon was - at most - but a figure of a greater 'Son', and his Temple, with all its glory, wealth, and beauty, only a pointer ONWARD to "A house not made with hands"; what Peter - after a difficult and painful transition - called, God's SPIRITUAL house.

Stephen concludes with a comprehensive gathering of all this history into "the Prophets", and virtually says that the spirit of prophecy was related to this ever-future, onward, and ultimate SPIRITUAL goal of God.

What again, then, does all this amount to? On the one side, it is a mighty exposure and denunciation of the incorrigible habit and disposition of GOD'S PEOPLE to bring what is essentially heavenly down to earth and fasten it there; to make of the spiritual something temporal; to make of the eternal something which will not - and cannot - abide; to make form, means, orders, and technique all-important. In a word, to have things fixed and boxed, so that the Holy Spirit is thwarted and frustrated in His ever-onward and ever-sovereign movement and innovation, if He so choose. The most dominant note, the most imperative cry of the New Testament is "Let us go on". But the context of this cry is - "outside the camp". The writer of those words in the Letter to the Hebrews, who has so much in common with Stephen, makes it abundantly clear that "outside the camp" means outside of all that which in its Judaistic nature systematizes and crystallizes CHRISTIANITY into a set and settled form: into something earth-bound and final.

On the other side, all this is a revelation of how fierce and terrible will be the opposition of such systems to a purely and definitely SPIRITUAL testimony. Unless there is a conforming there will at least be ostracism, and at most martyrdom.

2. THE EFFECT OF STEPHEN'S TESTIMONY

Now we have to go back to Jerusalem and look into the real meaning and effect of Stephen's testimony, and consider its particular meaning for Christianity.

Stephen had - at the cost of his life - dared to touch the Temple, and the Temple as the heart and sum of the Jewish system and hierarchy. The effect of his pronouncement was to repudiate that whole system and its earthly centre. He had seen that it had been but a pointer to the heavenly and spiritual which was reached and realised in the entry of Jesus Christ into this world. He had been spiritually immanent in all the aspects of that system and that history, dominating all its features and represented in all its constituents. They had never been the REALITY, the ESSENTIAL, but only ways and means by which the real was signified; they were signs not realities. That which they had signified had now come in fullness and finality, therefore, EARTHLY, material, and localised Temples, Priests, Sacrifices, Vestments, Forms, Names and Titles, Cults, Orders, Times and Seasons, and everything else that made up such a system had, at least, served its purpose, and, at worst, become an empty shell, and a hindrance to the spiritual.

Stephen, in statement and implication, said this, and said it in no uncertain terms and manner. There was no equivocation in his declaration, and he made it quite clear that to have been blind to the spiritual significations of their history, and to continue in that blindness now that the One signified had come was nothing less than 'resisting the Holy Spirit'.

Very well, then, that is so far as Jewry was concerned; but there was a twilight transition period in Jerusalem. While the Apostles and disciples had seen that Jesus fulfilled so much of the Scriptures (as see Luke 24), they certainly had but a very limited apprehension of His full significance as to the old system. They were still 'going up to the Temple', and that, AT THE HOUR OF THE SACRIFICE.

Their last recorded question to the Lord before His ascension shows that they were still clinging to the Jewish hope of a temporal Messianic kingdom on the earth, in spite of His parable of the lord returning after A LONG TIME, and all His teaching on the Holy Spirit, etc.

Is that why, when those who stood on Stephen's ground were, after his death, "all scattered abroad", the Apostles were excepted. They had not wholly repudiated Judaism, circumcision, the Temple, the sacrifices, etc., as Stephen had.

Why did Saul of Tarsus immediately seek out, in Jerusalem (Acts 9:13) and unto 'distant cities' (Acts 26:11), those who had identified themselves with Stephen's position, and leave the Apostles alone? True, the Apostles were having a hard time with the rulers, but not on Stephen's ground. James seems to have been able to hold things together with a group on a partial Judaistic ground, a compromise; and Peter and John were, for some time, with him, as 'Acts' shows. In Jerusalem the Christian Church was largely Judaistic, within the covert of the Temple and the ordinances. But, the Holy Spirit was moving on, and a point is reached where it is A QUESTION FOR CHRISTIANITY whether it was going on or going to stand still, which would mean going back.

The fact is that Stephen had caused a division - the first division - in Christianity, a division which has characterized Christianity right down the centuries into our own time.

The Holy Spirit was moving sovereignly toward a position of utter spirituality and heavenliness; the very essentials of Christ now being in Heaven and the Holy Spirit being here as the characteristic of this dispensation. Peter, himself, was caught up in that sovereign movement in the episode of the house of Cornelius. He prevaricated under the influence of James and "certain" others; but his letters show that he made the transition. This was also abundantly true of John.

But the great event in the sovereign movement of the Holy Spirit was the 'apprehending' of the super-Stephen, Saul of Tarsus. It was he who, in the seeing of Christ in a blaze of illumination, saw all the implications of Stephen's testimony. Henceforth the battle between both the immovable Judaisers and the twilight Christians on the one hand, and an utterly spiritual Church and Christianity, on the other, would focus upon him, until that full revelation had been embodied in his letters and he also fell fighting. Paul's spiritual position, as opposed to a temporal or a semi-mundane system was called "a heresy" (Acts 24:24, margin), and was referred to as a "sect which is everywhere spoken against" (Acts 28:22).

If we are prepared to call Paul's position a "heresy" or a "sect", let us remember that it was that for which Stephen died, and let us see clearly what he and his great successor really stood for, and for which he died. It is something very searching. It reached the first Apostles. It sifted the Church at its beginning. It lies at the root of very much Christian history. It explains many spiritual tragedies. It accounts for much loss of power. It is the meaning of much talk about 'schism', 'sectarianism' and 'divisiveness'.

It would be a vain hope to expect that all Christians - even evangelical Christians - would see the distinction that is presented, or that, if they did see it, would pay the price of accepting it. But there is no doubt or question that the most vital consequences for Christianity are bound up with this issue.

Shall we continue in or revert to what is VIRTUALLY a semi-Judaistic Christianity: an earth-tied, man-managed, system? Shall we fall into that pseudo-spiritual mistake which leads only to limitation - at least; the mistake of collecting from the New Testament, either in actualities or by deductions, certain forms and procedures, 'methods', and technicalities, and shaping them into a 'New Testament' formula, 'blueprint', and 'pattern'? Shall we attempt that vain thing of making a fixed mould from 'New Testament methods' and pour everything into it? Shall we constitute OUR churches on the basis of popular votes, majorities against minorities, natural selection, etc., etc.

Or shall we see what Stephen and Paul saw, that the only Prototype of the Church and the churches is Christ Himself; that the revelation of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is the only true way of building: that the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the qualification by spiritual gift is the Divine way of 'office', function, and responsibility: that this is the true ORGANISM springing and forming out of spiritual LIFE: that it is conception and not imitation, birth and not manufacture: that prayer and definite guidance coming out of it and not the 'Board Room' or its equivalent is the Holy Spirit's 'method'?

Stephen was the only one in the New Testament who used Christ's chosen title for Himself - "the Son of man", and in that designation all the universality and super-national, super-denominational, and super-racial features are embodied.

What we have written CAN be a key to the Bible, especially the New Testament, and while we believe profoundly that it represents the mind of the Spirit, we can only trust that there will be found a sufficient

spiritual concern to lead to a re-reading of Scripture with Stephen's testimony in mind.

No one, we trust, will think that there is any intention of FORCING division in mind or act. As we said in our heading, this is an appeal for spiritual Christianity. Christianity has had, and still has, its battles with heathenism and paganism, and this has meant many martyrs. But this does it no spiritual harm. Where real harm is done and loss is suffered, is in the battle within itself against retrogression, downward spiritual gravitation, traditionalism, legalism, and natural-mindedness. It is the battle against superficiality; which often masquerades as 'simplicity', a fear of depth.

Yes, this battle is a costly one, and has not infrequently brought the heavy stones against those who have stood for the essential spiritual character of this dispensation.

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