



## **“Bystanders?”**

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Bill J. Leonard at Myers Park Baptist Church*

*On July 28, 2024, from Acts 7:51-60*

**“At this moment in American religious and political life, what question should we let disturb us and keep us up all night?”**

That’s the query Dr. Tripp Fuller put to Wake Forest School of Divinity Dean Corey Walker and me during a two-hour Homebrewed Christianity podcast on March 14. The Homebrewed podcast was conducted at Lot 63, an accommodating new pub in the Old Salem historic district in Winston-Salem, packed with an engaging crowd of Moravian Church folks. The conversations from that evening sent me to the book of Acts, and the internal and external divisions that mark the post-Pentecost experiences of the FLEDGLING Christian church, divisions, I think, that raise parallel questions for “this moment in American religious and political life.”

In the mere four months since that podcast, the Acts texts have not changed but our times have, so much so that I’d correct Tripp Fuller’s query this way. There’s not just the **one** question about American religious and political life; today, they are **legion**. You want to keep me up all night, you got to stand in line! Case in point—this is the 5th draft of my sermon for this morning, and I may do a 6th draft while I’m up here! Hang on!

Today’s text and our times teach us this: The intensity of faith is no excuse for silencing others who have a different faith or none at all. Past and present, when a religion goes theologically or socially controlling, danger lies ahead. When that happens, bystanders may no longer have such a luxury.

Again, the word: **Then they dragged [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him.**

In this morning’s biblical text, gruesome as it is, we revisit the life and death of Stephen, one of the church’s first deacons, who became its first martyr after Jesus. I’ve never preached on this text before, and it is indeed a “hard saying.” But as I’ve often said in this pulpit, Myers Park church- folk have always allowed me to work without a homiletical net. **These verses usually appear in the common lectionary during Eastertide. I chose them today because they seem soberingly relevant right now to American Christianity, texts laden with questions that may indeed keep us up nights.**



Consider the first century church context: Jesus is crucified, buried, resurrected, and now departed. The Holy Spirit turned Pentecost into an awakening, the effects of which led an escalating number of Jews with varying ethnic backgrounds to claim the Jesus Story for themselves. **At this point there are only Jewish Christians; no Gentiles are wading into the baptismal waters.**

The text describes internal and external issues confronting this burgeoning community of faith. Post Pentecost, Acts says that these gospel primitives “sold their possessions,” “held all things in common,” shared common meals as a beloved community and gave themselves to the “apostles teaching, the breaking of bread, and prayers.” Acts adds that “they spent much time together in the temple.” **They were Jewish after all.**

Yet even in that spiritually pristine environment, race, ethnicity, and equality were ever present, fostering a controversy over gospel justice. The Hellenists, Greek-speaking, Christianity-leaning Jews from outside Palestine, protested that their **widows** were “being neglected” by the Jerusalem-oriented, Aramaic-speaking Jewish Jesus People in the daily distribution of bread. The apostles, whose preaching connected these multi-cultural communities, said they were too busy **declaring the word of God** to wait tables, so the church appointed seven deacons, including Philip and Stephen, to serve at meals. Stephen appears on the biblical scene in order to bring much needed care for these vulnerable members of the new community. If you’re a deacon in this congregation, that’s your heritage.

With the appointment of deacons, that controversy subsided, just in time for another one that haunts people of faith then, now and in the wee hours: **CAN RELIGIOUS PEOPLE DISAGREE WITHOUT THREATENING EACH OTHER?**

Stephen not only served the widows but, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” preached throughout Jerusalem so effectively that Greek-related Jews, former slaves from “the synagogue of the Freedmen,” “stood up and argued with him.” These Jews came from regions like—Greece, North Africa, and Asia. They debated Stephen but Acts says, “they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.” So, they brought charges against him for “saying things” against “the Temple and the (Jewish) Law.”

Taken before the High Priest in Jerusalem, Stephen preaches a defiant sermon, the lengthiest in the book of Acts, surveying Jewish history, and warning that the religion of his day had forgotten the tradition of patriarchs like Abraham, prophets like Moses, and kings like David. He faults them with being more concerned with orthodox Temple rituals than the prophetic witness begun with Moses, making no mention of Jesus until the end of his address, asking:



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**“Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.”** That’s when “they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.”

What’s going on here? Mikeal Parsons, Baylor U. New Testament professor, offers this important clarification. He writes: “In his speech, Stephen is not pitting Christianity over against Judaism as though they were two distinct religions. The debate depicted by Luke in Acts 6-7 is an **intra-Jewish** struggle over identity and the continuing role of Temple and Law; to label it otherwise is anachronistic.”

This morning let’s say first, the story reflects the struggle that arose between conflicting interpretations and interpreters within Judaism, conflicts that span the Gospels, poignantly evident in the crucifixion of Jesus. And it didn’t get any better. Acts chapter 8 says: “that day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.”

Jewish actions against Christians didn’t last long, especially after the Roman destruction of the Temple and the Jewish diaspora of 70CE. Roman persecution, documented in multiple martyrologies, occurs periodically until the 4th century when Constantine made Christianity a state religion. Over time, as “Christian nations” in Europe multiplied, Christianity itself became the persecutors of Christian “heretics” but especially against Jews, as evident in diatribes written by the Protestant reformer Martin Luther in the 1540s. Christian antisemitism sullies the church’s witness across history.

Second, the stoning of Stephen illustrates the way in which proponents of one belief system insist that theirs alone comes from God and must be protected at all costs. When Stephen disagrees, they close their minds and ears, and pick up stones.

If Mikeal Parsons describes the conflicts of Acts chapter 7 as **intra-Jewish**, we might call current divisions in American church and society **intra-Christian**, none more disturbing than the effort to make a particular type of Christianity America’s primary, privileged religion, with some groups even couching their Christian nationalism in the language of violence. Indiana/Perdue sociology professor Andrew Whitehead says Christian nationalism “refers to an ideology that asserts all civic life in the U.S. should be organized according to a particularly conservative and ethnocentric expression of Christianity.” It involves: 1) **“Strict moral traditionalism focused on sustaining social hierarchies.** 2) **An emphasis on authoritarian control—exercised by the “right” people—that includes the threat and use of violence.”** 3) **This “particular expression of Christianity as the undisputed framework of the U.S. and wants all levels of the government to preserve that framework.”**



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We address Christian nationalism here this morning, not simply because of its dangerous politics, but also its already dangerous impact on the nature of the gospel itself. Religious nationalism, as the Baptist Joint Committee's Amanda Tyler says, can "be co-opted by those in power to enforce a certain religious viewpoint on everyone else, and that's why it's such an urgent threat to religious freedom."

Baptist founder Thomas Helwys said it plainly 400 years ago: ***"That the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men [and women] to this or that form of religion, or doctrine: but to leave Christian religion free, to every[one's] conscience and to handle only civil transgressions."*** Helwys died in London's Newgate Prison around 1616 because he would not be a bystander in the struggle for religious freedom.

Third, the stoning of Stephen allows Luke to introduce us to a young, politically connected rabbi named Saul AKA Paul, a **bystander**: "one who is present but not taking part in a situation or event." Saul's holding the coats of Steven's assassins. The March podcast in Old Salem introduced me to Victoria Barnett's 1999 book, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust* (1999). Barnett's description of the position of the German Protestant Church is an alert to America 2024. She writes: *"The example of the Evangelical Church in . . . Germany illustrates how an institution can function as a 'bystander.' In its efforts to preserve its autonomy and its very existence, the institutional church effectively sided with state authority. This, in turn, enabled the regime to tighten its hold on the entire society. Thus, the church's behavior . . . undermined its own moral credibility."*

She concludes: "Human history is filled with terrible examples of brutality, cowardice, complicity, and indifference to suffering. There have always been bystanders: people in various walks of life who might have changed the course of history, had they chosen to become more actively involved." Irony of ironies, Saul AKA Paul, chose to do just that. "He appeared also to me," Paul wrote to the Corinthians describing how Jesus surprised him on Damascus Road. Transformed, Paul led one of the most radical actions in Christian history; he flung open the gospel door the Gentiles, that's most of us here this morning. "In Christ there is neither Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female," Paul wrote, and though he didn't live long enough to see that assertion fulfilled, perhaps we're a little closer to it, at least for now.

Given the hard questions confronting our churches and our country, let's each reflect on how we might relinquish our bystander status for the sake of the gospel good. We don't know what lies ahead this November, so we might remind American churches of the vision Roger Williams articulated when he founded Providence, Rhode Island in the 1630s as a beacon of religious liberty. "I desired that it might be a shelter for persons distressed of conscience. I then communicated my said purchase unto loving friends who desired to take shelter here with me." A shelter for distressed consciences. Isn't this that kind of faith community? Then sleep well tonight.