

Acts

Part 16 – “Witness and Opposition”

Acts 6:8-15

The story of Stephen’s ministry, trial, and execution (6:8-8:3) is the final episode in Luke’s narrative of the growth of the church in Jerusalem (3:1-8:3). This same passage is the first detail of Luke’s focus on the ministry of two Hellenists: Stephen and Philip (6:8-9:31). The theology of church growth through the proclamation of God’s Word is repeated. It will also be shown that persecution and opposition, far from stopping the church actually become means whereby the church spreads and the gospel is advanced outside Jerusalem.

Exegetical Outline:

- I. The Witness of Stephen (6:8-15)
 - A. The ministry of Stephen (6:8)
 - B. Dispute between Diaspora Jews and Stephen (6:9-10)
 - C. Conspiracy of the Diaspora Jews against Stephen (6:11-12)
 - D. Stephen interrogated before the Sanhedrin (6:13-15).

Main Idea: All Christians ought to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ knowing that it will result in opposition and persecution.

Stephen was one of the original seven deacons chosen by the church (6:3-5). As a deacon, Stephen is described as a man full of the Spirit and of wisdom. These same qualities will be seen in Stephen’s ministry of proclamation. Stephen’s ministry was comprehensive in that it encompassed both verbal proclamation of the gospel of Jesus and acts of mercy toward God’s people.

Four characteristics of a comprehensive ministry:

a) Mercy

- **6:3-5** – Stephen was a member of the original seven deacons charged to oversee the distribution of food to widows and orphans. Stephen must have had a reputation as a wise and merciful man to have been selected by the people for such a ministry.
- **6:8** – Luke tells us that Stephen was “full of grace.” This ought not be understood as a description of Stephen being gracious. Rather, that Stephen was “full of grace” means that he was a recipient of God’s saving grace. Stephen’s knowledge that God had been gracious to him would surely have formed the rationale for his own acts of mercy.

b) Power

- **6:8** – In addition to being full of grace, Stephen was “full of power.” This is a reference to the power of the Holy Spirit who had called and equipped Stephen for ministry. Like the apostles, Stephen was granted power to perform miraculous signs attesting to the authenticity of his message.
- **6:10** – “But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” Once again we see that God’s power is especially seen in boldness and competence in proclaiming God’s Word.

c) Witness

- **6:9-10** – It is clear that in addition to helping oversee the mercy ministry of the church, Stephen was giving public witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ (vv 13-14). His witness, like that of the apostles, was accompanied by miraculous signs (v. 8). This power was demonstrated by the Holy Spirit granting boldness and persuasiveness to his witness (v. 10).
- Just as in the case of the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles, the miraculous signs performed by Stephen were for the purpose of attesting to the authority of the message. The miracles served to support the message proclaimed. Stephen was not opposed for working miracles but for the message he proclaimed.
- **6:11-13** – The charges made against Stephen give us a clue as to the content of Stephen's proclamation. By proclaiming the eternal efficacy of Jesus' atoning death, Stephen was clearly indicating that the era of temple sacrifices and priestly mediation was over. This would have been "heard" as blasphemy against the temple and religious regulations.

d) Courage

- **6:11-15** – Stephen was not ignorant of the danger he was facing. Jesus had been publically crucified. The apostles had already been imprisoned and beaten for their preaching. Stephen could have easily defused the conspiracy against him had he only stopped proclaiming the gospel. Instead, Stephen courageously endured slander and threats for the sake of the gospel.

Theology in Application

1. All ministry ought to be gospel ministry.

- Stephen's ministry was not limited to organizing food distribution. His ministry, like that of all Christians, ought to involve the advance of the gospel.

2. Effective ministry is entirely dependent upon God.

- While skills are important, it is the power of the Holy Spirit that essential of effective gospel ministry. Ultimately we are not called to persuade people by the power of our personality or skills in communication. The only hope for effective ministry is the wisdom and power of God.
- **1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

3. The church will always face opposition and persecution.

- One of the things we notice for the first time in Stephen's case is that the opposition had spread from only the religious leaders to the people in general.