

Stephen of Jerusalem

By Dr. Dave Neale

Wasn't it just last week that we were gazing on Luke's description of the early days of the church as a Christian Camelot (Acts 2:43-47)?

The fishermen and women of Galilee were not educated people. They bore their testimony simply and with courage, and yet with power: ***We must obey God rather than any human authority*** Peter said when directed to stop talking about the resurrection.

The great Pharisee and teacher of the law, Gamaliel, after examining Peter and John, told the council, ***keep away from these guys; because if this is a human effort it will fail, but if not you may find yourself fighting against God!***

By the way, Paul claims to have been trained under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He is well known to us from the rabbinic material. Gamaliel occupies a position of such greatness that it was said that when he died "the glory of the law died" (M. Sota 9:15).

The reality for the young movement was that things became very complex very quickly. Doesn't that sound like the real world? Our own world?

Thousands of both Hellenized and traditional Jews were flooding into the young community of the first followers of Jesus. How do you think the Galileans felt?

Many priests were becoming Christians (Acts 6:7b). The temple rotational priests buzzing with the news of Jesus' resurrection. This great movement of the Holy Spirit brought in train a hugely fraught social situation.

Today in our journey in Acts chapters 6 and 7, we turn our hearts to the great Stephen of Jerusalem, the first martyr of the young Jesus movement. Stephen a ***pivotal*** figure for young church.

In a sudden turn, the first followers were yanked from their Camelot and plunged the into conflict almost exactly of the same nature as that which was mortal to Jesus of Nazareth. It must have been terrifying.

I don't want to talk about Stephen's martyrdom, per se, but about the man and why he is important to us. His was a shining life and an example for all Christendom, to be sure.

- his example of love and self-sacrifice;
- his willingness to "wait on tables" as appointed by the apostles;
- the noble way he bore his death, which, no doubt, influenced the young zealot Paul who saw the execution. He must have looked back on his approval of Stephen's death with immeasurable regret.
- of almost unimaginable importance is how the persecution of the church aroused by his death drove the young Christians out of Jerusalem and into the world (Acts 8). Like the day the dandelion becomes a puff ball of seeds blowing in the wind. Stephen was the pivot.
- And Stephen's importance as a pivotal figure isn't just for his towering intellect and oratorical power. He is Christianity's first intellectual and he stands in the tradition of the great intellects of the faith.¹

His importance lies elsewhere.

The conflict begins in earnest in chapter 6 with a dispute **within** the Jesus community between “Hellenists” and “Hebrews” over the fairness of the distribution of charity to widows and children.

The Greek-speaking Jewish Christians feeling their people were being neglected by the Compassionate Resource Warehouse. So Stephen, himself a Hellenist, a Greek speaking Jew who had accepted Jesus as Messiah, steps onto the board to try to quell the bickering.

That is within the movement. And then, the scene shifts to disputes with the non-believing Hellenist Jews from the Synagogue of the Freedmen,(Λιβερτινων, *libertinōn*) in Acts 6:8, there were scholars from Alexandria, Cyrene, Cilicia, Asia. Here Stephen really gets into it on the subject of Jesus the Messiah.

But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. (Acts 6:10)

The **first** real reason for Stephen’s importance to the young church is the fact that he is a Hellenist who saw the big picture – that Christianity was to be for the nations.

I oversimplify, but there four types of people.

- Hellenists (Gentiles)
- Hellenists who converted to Judaism (Proselytes, circumcised)
- Hellenized Jews – think of modern liberal Judaism
- Traditional Jews – you could roughly compare them to the modern ultra-orthodox Judaism

Stephen has a Greek name, which means “crowned one.”² He is a Jew (probably, rather than a gentile convert) who spoke Greek. He admired Greek culture and adopted its ways. As had most of the world at that time.³

The 60 million people who lived in the Mediterranean basin (including Palestine) Hellenized culture, admiring all things Greek, philosophy, architecture, sculpture. This was the legacy of Alexander the Great, who spread Greek culture through the Greek language.

Rome governed the world but the Greeks still had the world’s soul. The lingua franca of western Asia and the Mediterranean basin was... Greek, not Latin. Galilee was bi-lingual, Aramaic and Greek the two spoken languages.

Into *this* Hellenized world that the Messiah came ...***in the fullness of time.***

Only Stephen saw the big picture clearly.

In fact, Stephen reminds me of Alexander Hamilton, who, as a young man in his early-twenties, was General Washington’s right-hand aid during five years of the Revolutionary War. He wrote most of the Federalist Papers, the argument for a strong central government (along with James Madison). He sat at the drafting table that produced the American Constitution in 1787, all before the age of 30.

Hamilton could just see the future of a great nation in his mind; and Stephen was the only one who could see the global importance of the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection.

Isn't this starting to sound so deeply familiar? Culture wars. Deeply entrenched social and cultural issues, nationalism, ethnicities; the young movement already rent by tensions of whether accommodation to Hellenized culture was most important, or protecting Jewish traditionalism.⁴

The second reason Stephen is so important in the church is that he engaged the Hellenistic world on its own terms. Thoreau said wryly of the rhetoric of his day, "As if the object were to talk fast and not sensibly."

It doesn't matter how much we as Christians talk, if we don't do it *sensibly*. And Stephen is the patron saint of talking sense. It is no use trying to talk about our faith if we are not prepared to be sensible, to communicate, with all of the give and take that communication implies. I want to make sense to people who don't know what we are talking about. I'm a Stephenist on this.

Both Stephen and Paul defended the idea that the mission of Jesus should not be contained by tradition.. but that, in the tradition of the Hellenists, the gospel should show an openness to the gentile world and preach Jesus to the ends of the earth.

For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. (Mal 1:11) Malachi was a Stephenist.

Paul traded away the great Jewish pillars of circumcision and kosher food laws so that he could reach out to Gentiles – calling himself ***entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised*** (Gal 2:7). Paul was a Stephenist.

[Musicians come to help us prepare for Communion]

What I admire most about Stephen was the way he spoke *sensibly* to those who held positions other than the one for which he advocates.

Do you know why established churches are changing their names away from denominational tags? Or a large church, like GT, updates its name, with no mention of its denominational heritage? It's very common. Especially among the churches that are trying to appeal to the unchurched, the Hellenists. It is an effort to broaden the appeal of the church by removing confusing sectarian barriers. It is the Stephen thing to do.

We were a struggling denominational college in Calgary that finally got accredited degree approval from the province of Alberta. There we were, poised to prosper in a city full of Hellenists and they couldn't bring themselves to take the word Nazarene out of the title of the college. I was heartbroken. I just about left the building and didn't come back.

We missed our Stephen moment.

Because no one knew what Nazarene meant and no one wanted to go to a college with a sectarian name. It took 15 years of continued struggle to get to Ambrose University. Today the university prospers.

If it hadn't been for Stephen, Christianity would have remained forever a sect of Judaism, never leaving the walls of the synagogue and probably an historical footnote at best.

Instead, the final words of the Lord in Matthew ***Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*** (Matt 28:19)

As we now turn to the Lord's Table together, let us partake understanding that it is not only for ourselves we receive God's love, but for the whole world as our forebearers died to make possible.

¹ Luke reminds us that ***Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds.*** (Acts 7:22)

Solomon (Proverbs), Isaiah, Hillel, the rabbi that was such an influence on Jesus, the woman who wrote the Book of Hebrews, and Paul, of course, who was an example of this sort of culturally sophisticated, brilliant educated class to which Stephen belonged.

² The *First Nations Version* calls Stephen "Many Feathers." "Feathers can symbolize creativity, communication and all things related to the mind and intellect...to carry an important message or teach others... spoken or written words."

³ See *Stephen* in *The Anchor bible Dictionary*, vol.VI pp 207ff for many of my observations here.

⁴ "In the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts the author recommends Christianity as the religion best suited for the Hellenistic world." (*ABD*, III, 133) Well, its written in Greek after all. Stephen is the key figure in the defense of the gospel to a Hellenistic audience. Paul, though a Pharisee, becomes the missionary to the Hellenized world (circumcision and food laws not required, see Gal 2:11-14; Acts 15); describing himself as the taking the gospel to the uncircumcised, i.e. the Gentiles, i.e. the Hellenised world. Paul was a complex figure, a Roman citizen from Cilicia, educated, yet a Hebrew who through over his orthodoxy in the light of his calling to preach the gospel to the "uncircumcised." In Corinth he leads a congregation deeply accommodating to paganism, "prosperous and cosmopolitan" yet attempting to establish the gospel in that context. Libertine morality.