

Stephen

Stephen was one of the seven men chosen by the disciples soon after the beginning of the Church, to look after the distribution of assistant to the widows of the Church. Jews who accepted Jesus Christ as the Messiah were usually cut off from their families and the support they would receive from them.

As a result, the believers depended on each other for support. The sharing of homes, food and resources was both a practical and necessary mark of the early Church, [Acts 4:32-35].

The work of these seven men allowed the apostles to concentrate on the spiritual task of preaching the gospel message, [Acts 6:1-6].

The internal problem mentioned in Acts 6:1 was more likely caused by a language barrier, for there were Jews from many other lands who were converted at Pentecost, [Acts 2:5-12].

All the seven men had Greek names which solved the problem as all the other people who spoke in their native language would have a certain understanding of the Greek language as well as their own native language.

Acts 6:5,8,10 tells us that Stephen stood out among these seven men because of his faith, grace, spiritual power given by active indwelling of Holy Spirit and Godly wisdom.

Stephen had time to do more than the special work assigned to him, for he was among those foremost in working miracles and preaching the gospel message.

Stephen soon fell foul of the Hellenistic synagogue who brought him before the Sanhedrin on charges of blasphemy, [Acts 6:9-14].

Stephen replied to the charges with a survey of the history of Israel and an attack on the Jews for continuing in the tradition of their fathers and killing the Messiah, [Acts 6:15; Acts 7:1-53].

This brought upon Stephen the fury of the council and when he claimed to see Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God [probably as his advocate or witness in his defence] he was seized and stoned to death, [Acts 7:54-60].

Stephen met his end courageously as did his Master Jesus Christ, also on accusations by false witnesses, [Matthew 26:59-61]. Stephen also prayed as Jesus Christ did for his persecutors' forgiveness [Luke 23:34]. Stephen then committed his spirit into Jesus Christ's keeping, [Luke 23:46].

Whether this was a legal execution or not it seems that Pilate, who normally lived in Caesarea, turned a blind eye to it all.

There were striking consequences to Stephen's death.

The persecution of the Church that followed [Acts 8:1] led to a more widespread preaching of the gospel message, [Acts 8:4; Acts 11:19].

Stephen's death was also undoubtedly a factor in bringing Saul of Tarsus to Jesus Christ, [Acts 7:58; Acts 8:1,3; Acts 22:20].

But above all, Stephen's speech was the beginning of a theological revolution in the early Church, as the principles of the universal mission were clearly stated for the first time.

Luke records Stephen's speech at great length, and this surely indicates the importance he attached to it.

Stephen's theme in reviewing the history of Israel was that God's presence cannot be localised, and that people have always rebelled against the will of the Creator God.

The Temple at Jerusalem was static and too easily gave rise to a localised view of God. But the most high God does not dwell in manufactured houses, [Mark 14:58]. The Jewish religion had become static and failed to move towards the new Temple, the body of Jesus Christ, [Ephesians 2:19-22; Ephesians 5:23-24; Colossians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 6:16].

During his defence speech Stephen must have known he was bringing on his own death sentence.

Stephen's last words show just how much he had become like his Master Jesus Christ in what was a short Christian life.

Stephen's life is a continual challenge to all Christians, because he was the first to die physically for his faith in Jesus Christ, his sacrifice raises questions.

How many risks do we take in being a follower of Jesus Christ?

Would we be willing to die in our witness for Jesus Christ?

Are we willing to live for Jesus Christ?

Romans 12:1 [NIV] *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship."*

The Greek word translated "*bodies*" is "*soma*" meaning our whole life, physical body, mind and human spirit, [Job 32:8; 1 Corinthians 2:11]. The sacrifice referred to is the burnt sacrifice which was totally burnt up. The reason for such a "*living sacrifice*" is to express our gratitude for the grace that God has extended to us through the life, sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is how we worship the Creator God.

Having taken this decision then the indwelling Holy Spirit will begin to change our lives to make them acceptable to God, [Romans 12:2; Galatians 5:22-25].