Martyr in every sense of the word: Learning from the life and death of Stephen, the first known martyr

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Words are strikingly fluid in their meaning. One word can mean one thing at one point of history, and have an entirely different meaning later on. One such development is the usage of the English word, martyr. In time, the word martyr has developed in meaning in the following way[1]—

Martyr: one who gives evidence in, in or out of court
Martyr: one who gives solemn witness or affirmation (e.g., of one's faith)
Martyr: one who witnesses to personal faith, even in the threat of death
Martyr: one who witnesses to personal faith by the acceptance of death
Martyr: one who dies for a cause

There are many instances of people who could be classified under one or two of the above meanings of the word martyr. Yet it is rare for one to be a martyr in every sense of the word. One who does just that is Stephen as described in Acts 6–7.

Although the Apostle's Peter and Paul received the most attention in the Book of Acts,[2] Luke's account of the witness of Stephen is a critical part of the Book of Acts and the New Testament on the whole. Stephen's life and ministry is pivotal in the development of the Christian church. Luke shows that Stephen is represented as an unassailable witness to Jesus, and one who has an influential role to play in both the edification of the church and the mission to the Jews. There is much for the twenty-first century church to glean from Stephen's life and ministry.[3]

Martyr: one who gives evidence in, in or out of court

Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin to make a defense of his teaching (Acts 6:11). Although it was Stephen who was on trial, he witnessed (martyrdom) to the Gospel, not himself. Such a speech as this made by Stephen was by no means calculated to secure an acquittal before the Sanhedrin. It was

rather a defence of pure Christianity as God's way of worship. Stephen here shows himself to be the precursor of the later Christian apologists, especially those who defended Christianity against Judaism.[4] Stephen answered the charges brought forth by the prosecution. On the charge of blaspheming God by announcing the supersession of the temple by Jesus of Nazareth, he makes no position to deny it, but shows that through the Scriptures he has significant witness to the truth.[5]

Stephen also shows us that the true courtroom is in heaven. Although it was Stephen who was on trial (Acts 7:12-13), it was ultimately his listeners who were being held to account. That was the purpose of Stephen's words in Acts 7:51-53. As F. F. Bruce poignantly stated: 'Stephen, seeing their hostility and realizing the certainty of an unfavourable verdict, appealed from their judgment to that of the heavenly court, where Jesus stood as witness or counsel for the defense (Acts 7:56)…. It is equally noteworthy that, for Stephen, the Son of Man's role is an intercessory one' (Acts 7:56).[6]

Martyr: one who gives solemn witness or affirmation (e.g., of one's faith)

Stephen was given a significant administration role in the early church (Acts 6:3-6). His God-given responsibility was to make sure that the Hellenistic and Jewish widows were equally looked after. But that didn't diminish his responsibility to *be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you* (1 Peter 3:15). Stephen knew that all Christians are to be *martyrs* in this second definition of the word.

Stephen was a man *full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*. The love of Christ in him was combined with the conviction that what Christ did is efficacious and necessary for all people, which led Stephen to proclaim (witness) this great news.[7]

We learn from Stephen that gospel defense (or martyrdom in its second definition above) is empowered and attested by the Holy Spirit. The truth which Stephen believed was given by the Spirit (Acts 6:5, 10). It is the same Holy Spirit who speaks through Stephen and it is the attestation of the Holy Spirit which meant that the listeners *could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking* (Acts 6:10).

The listeners could not withstand the defence or apology[8] of Stephen, and neither could they understand his message. As Calvin stated, without the illumination of the Spirit, the Word can do nothing.[9] Without the Holy Spirit opening Stephen's listeners to the truth of his message, there was nothing they could do in response but reject it. Accordingly, it should be noted that the overseer of Stephen's trial was none other than the Holy Spirit.

Stephen's speech illustrates that Christian apologetics (or martyrdom) should be a Scripture-driven practice. When he was asked to explain himself, he pointed his listeners to the Old Testament Scriptures (Acts 7:1-53). His defence is littered with Old Testament quotations (e.g. 7:7; 7:28-29; 7:42-43; 7:49-50). Stephen's defence was Scripture-driven not simply in the way he referred to the Old Testament Scriptures, but he used the Old Testament Scriptures in the way they were designed to be read—pointing forward to the person and work of Jesus. Stephen's speech could easily be identified as a literal outworking of Jesus' words in Luke 24:44-46— *'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead…'*

Stephen's speech emphasises the need for apologetics to be a Scripture-driven practice because all apologetics must lead to the death and resurrection of Jesus. As the Scriptures are the God-given evidence for the person and work of Jesus, the Bible should shape the way we promote the gospel.

Martyr: one who witnesses to personal faith, even in the threat of death

Stephen's words in Acts 7:51-53 were biting, aggressive and confrontational. In the face of Jesus' words in John 16:2, Stephen may well have been prepared for the worst. But his words (the gospel truth) were much needed. I was once told the following and it has never left me: 'it is better to hear the harsh word now than to hear the harsh word on the last day before the Judgment Seat of Christ.'

In the back of our minds as we read Acts 7 should be 1 Corinthians 10:11: *Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.* According

to Stephen, the Jewish men he spoke to in Acts 7 had not learnt from the past. They had not only misunderstood biblical history, but they had repeated it. It was a case of like fathers, like sons. However, they took it further than their parents—they not only killed a prophet, they killed the Messiah (Acts 7:52).

John Stott quotes Alexander Whyte when Whyte was tempted to soften his message on sin. Whyte gave the following testimony: 'What seemed to me to be a Divine Voice spoke with all-commanding power in my conscience, and said to me as clear as clear could be: "No! Go on, and flinch not! Go back and boldly finish the work that has been given you to do. Speak out and fear not. Make them at any cost to see themselves in God's holy law as in a glass. Do you that, for no one else will do it. No one else will so risk his life and reputation as to do it. And you have not much of either left to risk. Go home and spend what is left of your life in your appointed task of showing my people their sin and their need of my salvation".'[10]

Biblical fidelity brings persecution (or martyrdom in its 3-5th definitions as given above).

3. Martyr: one who witnesses to personal faith, even in the threat of death.
4. Martyr: one who witnesses to personal faith by the acceptance of death.
5. Martyr: one who dies for a cause.

Stephen declared the gospel, and Stephen died for declaring the gospel to sinful men (Acts 7:54-60). It is believed that Stephen died either in the same year as Jesus, or the following year.[11] He showed that people had always rebelled against the will of God, especially through rebelling against His messengers (prophets, priests and kings).

Joseph (Acts 7:9-16) was sold by his brothers through jealousy.[12]

Moses (whom Stephen was allegedly to have spoken against) was also shown to be rejected by his brethren when he came to deliver them (Acts 7:35-41). God vindicated Moses, but the people rejected God and fell to idolatry.[13]

Even *Jesus*, the long-awaited Messiah was rejected and killed (Acts 7:51-53).

Stephen's speech again highlights 'the fact remains that the authentic gospel of the New Testament remains extremely offensive to human pride, and nobody who preaches it faithfully can expect to escape at least some degree of opposition'.[14] The account of Stephen's death also teaches us how we as Christians are to

respond to persecution. In a manner that was almost identical to Jesus when He was facing death at the hands of His enemies, Stephen *cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'* (Acts 7:60; cf. Luke 23:34). In doing this, Stephen was a living example of Jesus' call on all of His disciples to *'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven'* (Matt. 5: 44-45).

Christian martyrdom is never the end of the story. The gospel is ultimately unhindered.

Stephen's (martyrdom—both his witness and death) immediately led to fellow Christian's suffering persecution (see Acts 8:1-5), but ironically, this persecution helped to fulfil Jesus words in Acts 1:8—*'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth'*. After the stoning of Stephen, Jesus' followers finally depart the confines of the city, travelling throughout Judea and Samaria.[15] It must be seen as no accident that Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin forms the preamble to Luke's account of the origins of the Gentile mission (John 12:24). Just like God's calling to Abraham, He called His people out of a secure life in the traditional cultus to go out, wherever God may lead them. The danger was that they might follow their forefathers in the wilderness and look backward instead of forward.[16]

Stephen's life is another example of what the last two words of the Book of Acts tells us. The last two words of Acts are 'bold' and 'unhinderedly'. This is an excellent summary of the story of Acts. The gospel has proved to be unstoppable. The Book of Acts repeatedly affirms the truth that whilst God buries his messengers, he never buries his message. It is unhindered in its journey and its messengers have been marked by their courageous boldness.[17]

Stephen was in every form a martyr

Stephen gave evidence in court
Stephen gave solemn witness to his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ
Stephen gave witness to his faith in Jesus even in the threat of death
Stephen gave personal witness to his faith in acceptance of death
Stephen died for a cause.

Stephen was a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit—completely trusting in the all-sufficient and all-necessary atoning death of Jesus on His behalf; he was

a servant; he was an evangelist who relied on the Bible as His message; He spoke the truth when the truth wasn't wanted; he died for the truth; and through His life and witness, God's plan to bring salvation to the ends of the earth was continued. The Stephen we meet and the God He serves in Acts 6–7 should be a great comfort and challenge to the evangelical church today.

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ENDNOTES

1. D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), p. 36; quoting G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), pp. 65-6.
2. The dominant apostle in Acts 1–12 is the Peter; the dominant apostle in Acts 13-28 is Paul. For more details, see D. Cook, *Teaching Acts – Unlocking the book of Acts for the Bible Teacher* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2007), p. 16.
3. It is important at this point to state that Acts 6–7 is descriptive in its form. The Pastoral Epistles are obviously the starting point when seeking prescriptive guidance for the church. However, the description of the life and ministry of Stephen in Acts 6–7 give us a great real-life example of the Pastoral Epistles in action.
4. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (NICNT, rev. edn. (Michigan, USA; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), p. 130.
5. F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*, p. 151.
6. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), p. 224.
7. A. Fernando, "The Urgency of the Gospel," in D. A. Carson (ed.), *Telling the Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 379.
8. F. F. Bruce, *The Message of the New Testament* (USA, Paternoster, 1972), p. 52.
9. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.iii.2, p. 580.
10. J. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton; 1982), p. 310.
11. That is, AD 33 or 34. The estimate that Stephen died within 1-2 years of Jesus is assuming that Jesus died in AD 33. See Cook, *Teaching Acts*, 16
12. J. D. Douglas, *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, p. 1487.
13. J. D. Douglas, *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, p. 1487.
14. J. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, p. 309.
15. P. J. Achtemeier, J. B. Green & M. M. Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament* (Michigan; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), p. 255.
16. F. F. Bruce, *The Message of the New Testament*, p. 53.
17. Cook, *Teaching Acts*, p. 291.