

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

THE EARLY CHURCH

RLJ-2004

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MARCH 2, 2025

PART 8: THE STONING OF STEPHEN

FIRST CHURCH FIGHT

Through trial and error, the Devil learned that threatening the apostles did not work since the Holy Spirit resided in each of them and this is what made them fearless. Inducing believers to lie against the Holy Spirit did not work since God simply executed Ananias and Sapphira, bringing great fear on the rest of the Christians for the Godhead's holiness.

As a result, Satan dusted off his old trick of persuading people to fight each other through strife and discord. This tactic has worked fantastically for the past two millennia. All the denominations originated from fights and arguments amongst Christians.

It is something that I personally have experienced as I have been through numerous church splits. To this day, the Devil is hot on my heels and tries to spin people off faster than God can send them.

GREEKS VS JEWS

No one held any property within the Christian commune in Jerusalem, and when people worked and received an income, it was given to the apostles for distribution as needed. Jews from Greece that returned to Jerusalem with their families felt there was a disparity with their widows compared to the widows of local Jews. Satan fueled the fire of discord to the point the twelve apostles realized there was a serious contention brewing among the Christians. **Acts 6:1**

They understood it was necessary to structure the commune so that the strife and bitterness could be rooted out. They informed the church that they would not be involved in the daily food distribution since it would mean them deviating from the great commission. **verse 2**

DEACONS

The apostles recommended that other men serve in this role and instructed the church to find seven men of integrity that could be appointed to handle the daily food distribution. **verse 3**

Meanwhile, the apostles would continue in prayer and preaching the gospel. **verse 4**

These men would later receive the title of "deacon," which means "servant."

"Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre." (1 Timothy 3:8)



This announcement from the apostles was accepted by the church and they started the process of selecting seven men. All of the men were Jewish except for Nicolas, a gentile from Antioch who had accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. **Acts 6:5**

There was an ordination ceremony in which they prayed for and bestowed authority upon them. **verse 6**

Have you ever wondered why it was common for the early church to “lay hands” on people when they prayed for them? It was customary within the Hebrew culture to touch the person being consecrated for an office to denote the authority of the person doing the commissioning.

“And the LORD said unto Moses, Take thee Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay thine hand upon him.” (Numbers 27:18)

The gospel message was unrelentingly preached in Jerusalem despite the murderous threats of the ungodly Talmudic, religious leadership and the convicting power of the Holy Spirit continually added more people to the church.

There were thousands of priests serving at the temple in Jerusalem and Luke pointed out that a huge number of them abandoned Judaism – made null and void by Jesus’ death and resurrection – to embrace the Messiah sent by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. **Acts 6:7**

STEPHEN

Stephen was one of the seven men selected as a deacon. He had a great faith in Jesus and was baptized in the Holy Spirit just like the apostles. He prayed for people in Jerusalem and many were healed by the miracles wrought by God through him. **verse 8**

We do not know much about Stephen, where he came from, or what he had done prior to his conversion to Christ. We don’t know how long Stephen ministered, but he was so successful that men from a synagogue came to question and debate the gospel message, the miracles done by Stephen, and on whose authority he preached and performed miracles. **verse 9**

The debate started out fairly calm and centered on whether Jesus was truly the Messiah, but they were overcome by the answers supplied by Stephen. These men did not know it, but he was imbued with wisdom from the third person of the Godhead that thwarted every argument put forth by the men from Cyrene,¹ Alexandria,² Cilicia,³ and of Asia.⁴ **verse 10**

¹ Cyrene was a city of Libya, in Africa, lying west of Egypt.

² Alexandria was a Mediterranean coastal city in Egypt founded by Alexander the Great.

³ Cilicia was a coastal province of Asia Minor north of Cyprus. Its capital was Tarsus and where Paul the apostle was born. (Acts 21:39) It is highly probable that he opposed Stephen in this debate because of his presence at the deacon’s stoning. (Acts 7:58)

⁴ Asia included Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Persia.

FALSE WITNESSES

Unable to defeat the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, the debate ended with false accusations as the reprobate losers solicited the help of other men who were willing to perjure themselves by twisting Stephen's words. **verse 11**

The Jewish men from the different Roman provinces bribed witnesses and riled up the elders and scribes and brought Stephen to the Sanhedrin. **verse 12**

The bribed liars testified that Stephen had blasphemed the temple and the Mosaic law, paraphrasing Jesus' claim about destroying the temple and there no longer being a need for sacrifices with the Messiah's blood atonement. **verses 13-14**

The Holy Spirit put a glow on Stephen's face, and according to Luke, the Sanhedrin was amazed at his appearance because he looked like an angel radiating supernatural light. **verse 15**

STEPHEN'S DEFENSE

After the false witnesses were done spinning their lies, the high priest – presumably Annas – asked Stephen to verify the truthfulness of the charges. **Acts 7:1**

Stephen responded by reciting the history of their Hebrew forefathers and the events that had led to this point in time. In ending his defense, Stephen called out the Sanhedrin for their obstinance. They had heard the message of the Messiah, it had been repeated by the apostles, now by Stephen, and yet they steadfastly refused to yield to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. They were truly no different than their forefathers. **verse 51**

He took them to task by asking which of the prophets were not persecuted by their forefathers? The religious leadership was resisting the message and miracles of God, persecuting the apostles who spoke about the risen Messiah and carried out miracles in Jesus' name. By their actions, they were showing that they – not Stephen – were the true renegades. Manasseh was the evil king of Judah who ordered Isaiah sawn in half, and in the same fashion, the Sanhedrin had turned the Messiah over to the Romans for crucifixion. They employed Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus and were murderers for using the Roman to accomplish their dirty work. They were vile men of the worst character and Stephen was correct in calling them out! **verse 52**

The words uttered by Stephen were not much different than what Jesus had previously stated prior to the crucifixion. The God-man even predicted the offspring of these renegade Jews would persecute and kill the members of the early church.

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.

Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?

Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city:

That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.

*Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.”
(Matthew 23:29-36)*

Moses received the law on Mount Sinai from Jesus; accompanying the Son of God were angels which witnessed this solemn occasion. Stephen pointed out that mankind had since struggled to keep the Mosaic law. **verse 53**

Most people are ignorant of the fact that angels are not just messengers for God, but they constantly do His bidding. The following scriptures point out the role that angels played when Moses met Jesus on Mount Sinai and the Israelites were given what would become later known as the “Law of Moses,” “Mosaic law,” or “the law.”

“And he (Moses) said, The LORD came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from mount Paran, and he came with ten thousands of saints: from his right hand went a fiery law for them.” (Deuteronomy 33:2)

“The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels: the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in the holy place.” (Psalms 68:17)

“This is he (Moses), that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us.” (Acts 7:38)

“Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.” (Galatians 3:19)

CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH

The different factions of the Jewish leadership could not take the lambasting any longer. They had been previously been confronted by Peter and John, then the twelve apostles, and now this young, fanatical disciple of Jesus had insulted them, affirming they were the real apostates for their betrayal and murder of the God-man. The Sanhedrin was stung by Stephen's words, and being full of indignation – not righteous conviction, they lashed out angrily for calling out their despicable and evil actions. **verse 54**

Stephen was operating on a different plane of existence since he was baptized in the Holy Spirit. Right there in the courthouse, he looked up and saw heaven and Jesus standing on the right side of God the Father. **verse 55**

He tried to describe what he was seeing, but the council upon hearing Stephen describe the hated Son of man being on the right hand of God – a place of honor, was too much for them! They weren't having any more of his words, especially since now it appeared to them that Stephen was essentially bragging that God was on his side. **verse 56**

Pandemonium broke out in the courtroom as the renegade Jews cried out angrily, plugged their ears – ostensibly not to hear any more blasphemy – and charged at Stephen as a group. **verse 57**

This was no longer a dignified kangaroo trial, that fabrication was quickly replaced by a lynch mob! The entire group of men – priests, Sadducees, Pharisees – grabbed Stephen and bodily dragged him outside the city walls – undoubtedly kicking and punching the man who had so greatly offended them along the way. These ungodly men with no pretense of legality whatsoever proceeded to kill another innocent man. **verse 58a**

It is interesting that Luke records a certain Saul of Tarsus took part in the stoning by holding the upper garments of the men doing the butchery. This is the man that would personally be recruited by the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus. Saul/Paul would go on to write the majority of the New Testament scriptures and become arguably one of the greatest apostles. **verse 58b**

Stephen was standing as he was hit by one stone after another, kneeling down, he asked God to forgive the renegade Jewish leadership for his death. He commended his spirit to Jesus while his body was savagely pummeled and overcome by the stones from the mob. **verses 59-60**

SUMMARY

The honeymoon for the believers in Christ was over; there would be more church fights as the Devil had declared open war on the church. The suffering had begun!

Remember, it's not so important how you begin your life after salvation, but how you finish it!

Do you have an ear to hear with?