

# A MINISTRY FOR HUNGRY SAINTS

UNDER THE EXALTED CHRIST, THE GOSPEL BEGINS TO SPREAD

# THE ACTS

† THE BOOK OF ACTS

## OF THE APOSTLES

*An overview of the Book of Acts, by Given O. Blakely*

### ACTS 5:31-32

*"Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey Him."*

"Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

### Lesson #27

#### COMMENTARY ON: 6:8-15

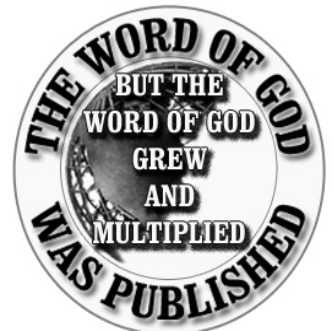
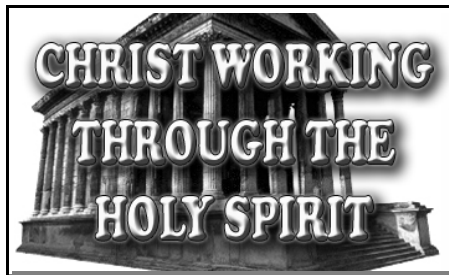
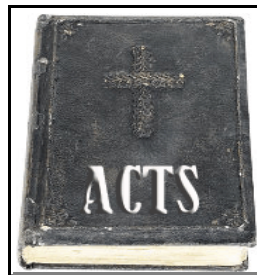
#### STEPHEN IS OPPOSED

Satan now picks up the pace of his aggression against the church, continuing to work through established and dead religion. Where men have only a form of godliness, they become tools through which Satan can oppose Christ, the truth, and those who speak it. At this point, all of opposition has been directed toward those who have spoken – who have declared the Gospel and expounded it with power. No one has come against the church because of its manner of life. Now, those who can declare the Gospel with competency and power begin to increase. A relatively new believer surfaces who has an excellent grasp of the Scriptures, and is able to correlate them with the salvation of wrought in Christ. This circumstance propels him into the limelight, for he cannot keep silent. His influence is so significant that it strikes into the hearts of those who only have the letter of the Law. The result is that they also cannot keep quiet. They must oppose what is being said, for it contradicts what they have embraced.

### ACTS 17:26-27

*"And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us."*

" . . . and ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

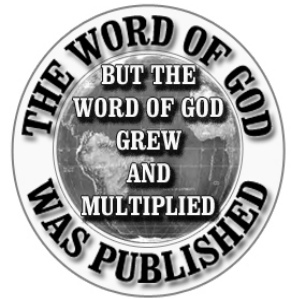


Since May, 1993, a ministry instituted for the encouragement of believers in Christ



## The Book of Acts

### Lesson Number 27



A MINISTRY INITIATED IN MAY 1993, AND DEDICATED TO STRENGTHENING THOSE WHO ARE IN CHRIST, BY BUILDING THEIR FAITH, ENHANCING THEIR JOY, AND STABILIZING THEIR HOPE, ENABLING THEM TO WORK OUT THEIR SALVATION WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING.

**TRANSLATION LEGEND:** ALT = Analytical-Literal Translation (2005), AMPLIFIED = Amplified Bible (1965), ASV = American Standard Version (1901), BBE=Bible in Basic English (1949), DRA = Douay-Rheims (1899), ERV = English Revised Version (1885), ESV = English Stand Version (2001), GNB = Good News (1966), GWN = God'S Word (1995), IE = International English, ISV = International Standard Version (1967), JPS = Jewish Publication Society (1917), KJV = King James Version (1611), L.LITV = Literal Translation of the Bible ((1976), LIVING = Living Bible (1971), MKJV = Modern KJV (1962), MONTGOMERY = Montgomery's New Testament (2001), MRD = Peshitta-James Murdock Translation (1852), NAB = New American Bible (2002), NASB = New American Standard Bible (1977), NAU = New American Standard Bible (1995), NIB = New International Bible, NIV = New International Version (1984), NJB = New Jerusalem Bible (1985), NKJV = New King James Version (1979), NLT =New Living Translation (1996), NRSV = New Revised Standard Version (1989), PHILLIPS = J B Phillips New Testament (1962), PNT = BISHOP'S New Testament (1595), RSV = Revised Standard Version (1952), TNK = JPS Tanakj (1985), Webster = The Webster Bible (1833),WEYMOUTH = Weymouth's New Testament (1903), WILLIAMS = William's New Testament (1937), TYNDALE = Tyndale's Bible (1526), WYCLIFFE = Wycliffe New Testament (1382), YLT =Young's Literal Translation (1862).

----- Lexicon and Bible Translation Codes with Identification -----

**LEXICON LEGEND:** FRIEBERG = Friberg Lexicon, UBS = UBS Lexicon, LOUW-NIDA = Louw-Nida Lexicon, LIDDELL SCOTT = Liddell Scott Lexicon, THAYER = Thayer's Greek Lexicon, LEH = LEH Lexicon, GINGRICH = Gingrich Lexicon

THE INSPIRED RECORD OF HOW THE ENTHRONED CHRIST, BY MEANS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, WORKED THROUGH HIS HOLY APOSTLES AND GODLY MEN, TO SPREAD THE WORD OF THE GOSPEL THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE WORLD, AND TO BRING EDIFICATION AND STABILITY TO MEMBERS OF CHRIST'S BODY.

DISCLAIMER: The quoting of other translations is not to be taken as a condoning of them. My purpose is rather to show the remarkable diversity, and sometimes outright contradictions that exist among these various versions of Scripture. Our understanding of the Word of God ultimately depends upon our comprehension of the Lord Himself and His eternal purpose. Where this understanding is not present, we are shut up to scholasticism and conjecture, both of which are of the world, not of God.

# STEPHEN IS OPPOSED

“ 6:8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. 9 Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. 11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. 12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council, 13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: 14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. 15 And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.” (Acts 6:8-15)

## INTRODUCTION

Satan now picks up the pace of his aggression against the church. He is depicted as walking about, stalking, as it were, and “seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet 5:8). He is not merely attempting to pull men into the quagmire of immorality. That has never been his focus. His very first effort to seduce

mankind was on an intellectual level, not a sensual one. His efforts are directed toward driving a wedge between God and man – to cause men to loosen their hold on eternal life. Even the devil knows that those who are not devoted to the Lord will be available to him for all manner of diabolical deeds.

### WHEN MEN CORRUPT RELIGION, IT LEADS TO DEEP MORAL CORRUPTION

Men have often marveled that prominent religious figures have fallen into deep immorality. Some have adopted a spurious theology that allows them to easily explain these

*A righteous man is opposed, even though his opponents cannot resist his wisdom – by Given O. Blakely*

## CONTENTS

- FULL OF FAITH AND POWER (6:8a)
- HE DID GREAT SIGNS AND WONDERS (6:8b)
- THE FIRST CASE OF DISPUTATION (6:9)
- THEY WERE NOT ABLE TO RESIST (6:10)
- THEY SUBORNED MEN (6:11a)
- WE HEARD HIM SPEAK (6:11b)
- THEY STIRRED UP THE PEOPLE (6:12a)
- THEY CAME, CAUGHT, AND BROUGHT (6:12b)
- THEY SET UP FALSE WITNESSES (6:13)
- THE WITNESS AGAINST STEPHEN (6:14)
- THEY SAW HIS FACE (6:15)
- CONCLUSION

moral plummets. They tell us that we are all weak, and thus such occurrences are readily understandable. I suggest to you that this is not a spiritually rational assessment. **In such cases, the religion that a person has embraced is largely responsible for moral failure.** Perhaps it would be better said, the manner in which the religion has been embraced has been fundamentally flawed.

In the case of *“pure religion and undefiled before the Father”* (James 12:27), faith is the compelling factor in life, for *“the just shall live by faith”* (Rom 1:17; Heb 10:38). **Where that faith is not found, there is a certain distance that forms between the individual and the God of heaven.** This is because *“without faith, it is impossible to please Him”* (Heb 11:6). In fact, the absence of faith is what causes one to *“draw back,”* increasing the distance between him and God. In such a case, God has no pleasure in that person. As it is written, *“but if any man draw back, My soul shall have no pleasure in him”* (Heb 10:38). God once said to wayward Israel, *“I have no pleasure in you”* (Mal 1:10). The insightful Psalmist wrote, *“For thou art not a God that hath*

*pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee”* (Psa 5:4).

It is possible for the sophist to present all manner of explanation about how God loves the individual, desires the best for them, and will patiently endure their folly. However, they will find it exceedingly difficult to establish that persuasion with the Word of God – particularly when it concerns someone professing the name of Christ..

### THE CASE WITH THE GENTILES

**Deep immorality is more a sign of Divine abandonment than it is of Satanic ensnarement.** This is how the Spirit accounts for the deep moral degradation that pervaded the Gentile world. **When men became corrupt in their religion, God gave them over to uncleanness, or moral corruption.** Here is how it is stated in Scripture. *“Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves”* (Rom 1:22-24). To clarify the matter, He continues, *“Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen”* (Rom 1:25).

This, then, became the justification for Divine abandonment, so that men lost their power to avoid the expressions of profound corruption. Therefore it is written, *“For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with*

*men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet. and even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful”* (Rom 1:26-31).

The eruption of especially reprehensible conduct among the Gentiles is therefore traced back to the Lord’s attitude toward them. He removed restraining influences, like pulling the moral floor out from under them. When He did this, they plummeted into the bottomless pit of moral corruption.

### THE CASE OF THE JEWS

God did the same thing after He had revealed certain aspects of Himself in the Law, making a covenant with Israel. When they corrupted an even more extensive revelation than nature, **He also gave them over to do things they would not ordinarily have done.** The Psalmist refers to this Divine abandonment. *“But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts’ lust: and they walked in their own counsels”* (Psa 81:11-12). Stephen also covers this in his convicting testimony to the Jewish counsel, accounting for the historical propensity of Israel to idolatry. *“And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven:”*

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as it is written in the book of the prophets, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices by the space of forty years in the wilderness?" (Acts 7:42).

Lest men be driven to erroneous conclusions, the magnitude of this

19). That abhorrence aggravated their fallen condition.

**When men persist in not taking their relationship to God seriously, and when they consistently ignore His Word, all the while choosing to still retain His name, God will deliver them over to**

power to work around that.

**This is a direct result of God's withdrawal from them.** While that situation can be remedied by repentance and conversion (Acts 3:19), it cannot be done as long as they continue their moral plummet. Because God is not in it, their religion has allowed them to think more highly of themselves than they ought to think – a condition against which the saints are solemnly warned (Rom 12:3).

**SATAN CONTINUES TO WORK IN THIS MANNER**

Satan continues to work through established and dead religion. Where men have only a form of godliness, they become tools through which Satan can oppose Christ, the truth, and those who speak it.

**TO THIS POINT**

In the book of Acts, to this point, all of opposition has been directed toward those who have spoken – who have declared the Gospel and expounded it with power. **No one has come against the church because of its manner of life.**

Now, those who can declare the Gospel with competency and power begin to increase. A relatively new believer surfaces who has an excellent grasp of the Scriptures, and is able to correlate them with the salvation of God wrought in Christ. This circumstance propels him into the limelight, for he cannot keep silent. His influence is so significant that it strikes into the hearts of those who only have the letter of the Law. The result is that they also cannot keep quiet. They must oppose what is being said, for it contradicts what they have embraced.

**In the book of Acts, to this point, all of opposition has been directed toward those who have spoken – who have declared the Gospel and expounded it with power. No one has come against the church because of its manner of life.**

circumstance is succinctly expressed in Scripture. *"Therefore was the wrath of the LORD kindled against His people, insomuch that He abhorred His own inheritance"* (Psa 106:40). Early in their history, God warned them that it was entirely possible for Him to view them as He did the heathen who occupied the land of Canaan before them. *"And ye shall not walk in the manners of the nation, which I cast out before you: for they committed all these things, and therefore I abhorred them"* (Lev 20:23).

In his valedictory address to Israel, Moses rehearsed the affect that their iniquity had upon their God. *"Of the Rock that begat thee thou art unmindful, and hast forgotten God that formed thee. And when the LORD saw it, He abhorred them, because of the provoking of his sons, and of his daughters"* (Deut 32:18-

reprehensible conduct which they cannot imagine themselves doing. In the case of the Jews, Paul said, they *"both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men"* (1 Thess 2:15).

**WHY SAY THESE THINGS**

It is necessary to say these things because of the nature of our text. In it we find religious men of high rank increasing their opposition to Christ and His spokesmen. They have a growing hostility toward the church – the body of Christ. This is especially true of those who speak publicly. There is no end to which the religiously corrupt will not go to suppress the preaching of the Gospel. The only restraint upon them will be civil law, and they will do everything in their

**FULL OF FAITH AND POWER**

<sup>6:8a</sup> **And Stephen, full of faith and power . . .** Other versions read, "full of grace and power," <sup>NASB</sup> "full of God's grace and power," <sup>NIV</sup> "filled with God's favor and power," <sup>GWN</sup> "the man so full of faith and the Holy Spirit's power," <sup>LIVING</sup> "full of grace (divine blessing and favor) and power (strength and ability)," <sup>AMPLIFIED</sup> "full of grace and spiritual

power," <sup>PHILLIPS</sup> "full of grace and fortitude," <sup>DARBY</sup> and "a man richly blessed by God and full of power." <sup>GNB</sup>

The different translations are based on differing manuscripts. Those that read "faith and power" include the following: KJV, NKJV, GENEVA, PNT, RWB, TNT, WEB, YLT, LIVING, ALT, BISHOPS, EMTV, KJVR, LITV,

MKJV.

Those that read "grace and power" include the following: ASV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, RSV, BBE, CSB, DARBY, ERV, ESV, MRD, NAB, NAS, NAU, NET, NJB, NLT, WEYMOUTH, ISV, MONTGOMERY, AMPLIFIED, PHILLIPS.

Actually, both statements are correct, and in no way contradict each

other. One emphasizes the BASIS – grace. The other accents the MEANS – faith. In my judgment, the expression “*faith and power*” most precisely conforms to the revealed manner of speaking of Kingdom realities. It emphasizes *the means* through which Stephen appropriated the grace that accompanied his power, or ability. In all of its various involvements, salvation is always “*by grace through faith*” (Eph 2:8). Grace accents God as the Source, and faith punctuates the experiential quality that takes hold of grace.



There is no need to further address this matter as it is not really an issue. I will proceed with a preference for the reading “*faith and power.*”

#### FULL OF FAITH

What does it mean to be “*full of faith?*” It is certainly an intriguing expression. As I have mentioned before, only Stephen and Barnabas are expressly said to have been “*full of faith*” (Acts 6:5,8; 11:24).

As used here, the word “*full*” means “filled up, as opposed to empty . . . covered in every part . . . thoroughly permeated with . . . complete, lacking nothing,” THAYER “space fully occupied . . . rich or abounding in,” FRIBERG “complete, full grown,” UBS and “abundant.” LEH

There are a number of perspectives seen in this word, and all of them provide us with some very challenging concepts.

- ⇒ “*Full*” in the sense of a glass of water being filled to the top. In this perspective, the flesh is crucified, self is denied, and the devil is being resisted.
- ⇒ “*Full*” in the sense of maturity – being fully grown. Here faith would

be accompanied by mature understanding and insight.

- ⇒ “*Full*” in the sense of covering every aspect of life, like a roof covers a house. In this case, the person would be wholly devoted to Lord, living unto Him and reckoning himself to be dead indeed unto sin, and alive unto God.
- ⇒ “*Full*” in the sense of occupying every facet of life, or thoroughly permeating every aspect of life. Here, whatsoever if done in word or in deed is deliberately and consciously done for the glory of God.
- ⇒ “*Full*” in the sense of abundant, like a full harvest. In this view, the realities that are obtained by faith would be found in abundance in the individual.

There is more to being “*full of faith*” than this, but this will suffice to confirm the nature of such a condition. **To be “*full of faith*” means that the things that are appropriated by faith were found in abundance in Stephen.** The following, though not a thorough listing, are included in the things faith brings to the individual.

- ⇒ A purified heart (Acts 15:9).
- ⇒ The living of new life (Rom 1:17).
- ⇒ The righteousness of God (Rom 3:22).
- ⇒ Access to the grace of God (Rom 5:2).
- ⇒ Standing firm (Rom 11:20).
- ⇒ Waiting for the hope of righteousness (Gal 5:5).
- ⇒ Christ dwelling in the heart (Eph 3:17).
- ⇒ Understanding (Heb 11:3).
- ⇒ Being kept by God.

**When one is “*full of faith,*” these qualities are flourishing within him.** Such a person is “*rich in faith*” (James 2:5), and “*strong in faith*” (Rom 4:20). This is an individual that trusts in the

Lord with **all** of his heart, and does not lean to his own understanding (Prov 3:5). Such people **are** doing what others are admonished to do. They **are** walking where others are exhorted to walk. They **are** spiritually intelligent, and **can** handle the Word aright, for “*faith cometh by hearing,*” and they have leaned their ear toward the Word of God.

Stephen was such a man – even though he was a relatively new *Christian* – two years of at the most. **He had made rapid progress because he had availed himself of the “*treasures of wisdom and knowledge*” that are hidden in Christ, and are available to all believers** (Col 2:3). He had seen in the Gospel something of the magnitude of salvation, and, like Joshua and Caleb, had eagerly possessed the land. **That, of course, is one of the distinct advantages of hearing a clear and undiluted proclamation of the Gospel of Christ.**

#### FULL OF POWER

The word “*power*” comes from a word meaning, “strength, power, ability,” THAYER “able to produce a strong effect,” FRIBERG “supernatural power,” UBS “the ability to perform a particular activity or to undergo some experience - ‘ability, capability’,” LOUW-NIDA and “authority.” LEH

In a nutshell, “*power,*” as used in this text, is the ability to do something that cannot be achieved through natural aptitude. This kind of power cannot be learned in the schools of men. It is not the result of personal discipline. It is not an ability that is the result of a disciplined approach to development. No person is born of a woman with this kind of power. Furthermore, it has to do wholly with the work of the Kingdom, and matters pertaining to life and godliness.

There is a lower form of “*power*” that comes from God, yet is limited to the affairs of life in this world. **That power brings no eternal advantage.** Thus Samson could defeat a thousand Philistines, yet fall prey to the subtlety of a dishonest woman (Judges 15:16; 16:20). Solomon was expert in all manner of earthly wisdom, yet was led astray into idolatry by his wives (1 Kgs 4:29-30; 11:7-9). God can give people “*power to get wealth,*” yet a quest for that wealth can lead them astray so that they “*fall into*

temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts” (Deut 8:18; 1 Tim 6:9). The kind of power that is realized *“in the flesh”* – even though it comes from God – gives a person no Kingdom advantage. God gave Nehuchadnezzar a kingdom (Dan 5:18-19), yet he was judged for his pride (Dan 4:30-32; 5:20).

Stephen was not *“full”* of that kind of power. This was power of a higher order, that is directly related to the *“great salvation”* being implemented by the exalted Christ. **The exploits that are accomplished through this power cannot be replicated by those who are not reconciled to God.** In fact, we have an example in Scripture of a man who sought to purchase the ability to confer the gift of the Spirit on other people. It is written, *“And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost”* (Acts 8:18-19). The nature of his person and request are seen in the answer of Peter: *“But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: **for thy heart is not right in the sight of God**”* (Acts 8:20-21). He was a vessel into which the power of reference could be placed.

**There are certain moral and spiritual boundaries within which Divine power is given.** Those who are outside of those boundaries are wrong in seeking

**The cause of such growth is directly owing to the Gospel that is being declared. It is the truth that, when known, brings men such marvelous liberty (John 8:32). It is the truth that sanctifies the people, equipping them to do the work of the Lord (John 17:17). It is the Gospel that is the assigned domain in which men “stand”**

such power. Their attention must rather be given to the appropriation of grace and truth.

**All of this means that Stephen’s heart was right.** His thoughts were acceptable. He was, in fact, *“a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work”* (2 Tim 2:21).

#### A Word About Unusual Response

In the modern church scene, those with an usually good response to preaching are very unusual. Stephen stood out among a group of fervent and consistent disciples – even among seven of them who were publicly noted for being *“full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom”* (Acts 6:3). How is it that such a response is possible? For some, this is possible only when there are a set of strictly enforced rules, together with a rigorous form of accountability. The leader of the people is perceived as a demanding one, who imposes his own will upon the people. This, in fact, is how our own fellowship is perceived by many. Seeing that we have

a core of young men and women who are able to express themselves intelligently and engage in many Kingdom activities, some have imagined that it is owing to my own demanding and imposing nature.

**However, such a fleshly trait is not capable of sustaining steady growth up into Christ in all things.** The cause of such growth is directly owing to the Gospel that is being declared. **It is the truth that, when known, brings men such marvelous liberty** (John 8:32). It is the truth that sanctifies the people, equipping them to do the work of the Lord (John 17:17). It is the Gospel that is the assigned domain in which men *“stand”* (1 Cor 15:1). There are no exceptions to these things.

**Stephen’s excellence can be traced back to the message he had embraced – the preaching of insightful and spirit-filled men.** That preaching, coupled with his faith, is what discovered the particular gifts that He was given, enabling him to fulfill a specific role in the body of Christ.

## HE DID GREAT SIGNS AND WONDERS

### GREAT SIGNS AND WONDERS

The power with which Stephen was endowed was made known in *“great signs and wonders.”* **He was able to extend his works beyond the circumference of nature.**

*“<sup>8b</sup> . . . did great wonders and miracles . . .”* Other versions read, *“performing great wonders and signs,”* NASB *“did great wonders and miraculous*

*signs.”* NIV *“wrought great wonders and signs,”* ASV *“was doing great wonders and signs,”* ESV *“He did amazing things and performed miracles,”* GWN *“as working great wonders and signs,”* NAB *“began to work miracles and great signs,”* NJB *“did spectacular miracles,”* LIVING *“he was working miracles,”* IE *“performed great marvels and signs,”* WEYMOUTH *“went on performing great signs and wonders,”* WILLIAMS and *“continued to perform*

*miracles and remarkable signs”* PHILLIPS

Prior to this, on the day of Pentecost, Peter had associated the working of miracles, signs, and wonders, with the approval of God – particularly as related to Jesus Christ. *“Ye men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you,*

as ye yourselves also know" (Acts 2:22). He had also declared that when the Spirit was poured forth "upon all flesh," there would be "signs in the earth" (Acts 2:19). **In other words, these would be wrought in Divine discretion, and not indiscriminately.**

Up to this point in the book of Acts, **only the apostles** are said to have worked signs, wonders, and miracles.

⇨ "And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles" (Acts 2:43).

⇨ "Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none: but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk. And he took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. . . . For the man was above forty years old, on whom this miracle of healing was showed" (Acts 3:6-7; 4:22).

⇨ "And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people: (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch" (Acts 5:12).

Now, for the first time since Jesus ascended into heaven, someone other than an Apostle is working "great signs and wonders." Immediately following the first opposition faced by Peter and John, the church had asked God to grant "that with all boldness" they might speak His word, by stretching forth His hand "to heal; and that signs and wonders" would be "done by the name" of His "Holy Child Jesus" (Acts 4:30). That did, in fact happen, as recorded in Acts 5:12. **Now, the answer to that prayer is extended beyond the apostles to another member of the body of Christ.**

In Stephen we see the word fulfilled that was later given by Paul concerning the gifts God places in the body: "To another . . . the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles . . ." (1 Cor 12:9-10). The church in Galatia is also reported to have had miracle workers among them. "He therefore that ministereth to you the

Spirit, and **worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?"** (Gal 3:5).



These gifts, of course, were given at the discretion of the Lord Himself, and are driven by Divine purpose. That discretion was confirmed in the aptitude, ability, and appropriateness of the one receiving a gift, as well as the particular work the Lord was doing among the people. **That is, what Stephen did was a revelation of the ability God had given to him through the Spirit.** It was an example of "the manifestation of the Spirit," which "is given to every man to profit withal" (1 Cor 12:7). As is made known in Scripture, the Spirit is "distributing to each individual as He wills" (1 Cor 12:11). In strict accord with the nature of the Kingdom of God, this involves the recipient having faith, which is the means of appropriation. It also requires pureness of heart in the individual, and a humble and contrite spirit. If a person is going to be used by God, he must have separated from defiling influences, thus being made "meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work" (2 Tim 2:19-21).

#### An Illustration of Appropriate Gifts

Men often dispute about whether or not gifts of this sort are even intended for our day. All of this is like beating the air, for it involves nothing more than human speculation. It is more wise for men to devote themselves to being ready to be used by God, instead of hypothecating about the manner in which they can be used, or what gifts may be available to them. The Head of the church will see to it that the gifts are

in strict accord with His own purpose, and what is needed at that particular time. When, for example, a man was sent to prepare the way of the Lord, it proved to be a man of great holiness and sobriety. In fact, he was a ascetic man who received the word of the Lord while He was "in the wilderness" (Lk 3:2). His parents were strictly charged by a holy angel to raise him in the strictest manner: "For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, **and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb**" (Luke 1:15). When his ministry began, it is written that he came "neither eating bread nor drinking wine" (Lk 7:33). This was John the Baptist, and indicates that he was a Nazarite, raised in the strictest fashion. The law provided more details concerning how such a man was to spend his life. "Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When either man or woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazarite, to separate themselves unto the LORD: he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no vinegar of wine, or vinegar of strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried. All the days of his separation shall he eat nothing that is made of the vine tree, from the kernels even to the husk. All the days of the vow of his separation there shall no razor come upon his head: until the days be fulfilled, in the which he separateth himself unto the LORD, he shall be holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow. All the days that he separateth himself unto the LORD he shall come at no dead body. He shall not make himself unclean for his father, or for his mother, for his brother, or for his sister, when they die: because the consecration of his God is upon his head. All the days of his separation he is holy unto the LORD" (Num 6:2-8).

Yet, of John the Baptist it is written, "John did no miracle" (John 10:41). This was certainly not owing to any lack of qualification on John's part, for Jesus said of him, "Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Mat 11:11).

**John the Baptists' gifts were adapted to his ministry, and were appropriate for the times during which he ministered.** They had nothing to do with what was possible, but rather dealt with what God willed. It was not that the time of the miraculous had ceased, for his

own birth was of a miraculous order, his parents being “*well stricken in years,*” and the woman who bore him being “*barren*” prior to conceiving John (Lk 1:7). **His ministry did not require working miracles.**

At this position in time, and in strict accord with the purpose of God, Stephen was granted to be “*full of power.*” In him we have an example of the fulfillment of a statement made by Hanai the seer. “*For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him*” (2 Chron 16:9). God found such a man in Stephen, who had also “*used the office of a deacon well,*” and therefore obtained “*a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus*”<sup>NKJV</sup> (1 Tim 3:13).

**disseminated.**

To be sure, our Lord commanded that the Gospel is to be “*preached to every creature,*” as the disciples were sent “*into all the world*” (Mk 16:15). **However, no preaching of Scriptural reference began or concentrated on those who were in total darkness.** However noble such an approach may appear to be, one will have a difficult time supporting it with the Word of God.

First, we are categorically told that “*the Gospel of Christ*” is “*the power of God unto salvation to the Jew first*” (Rom 1:16). That does not mean first in time alone, but first in order as well. When instructing His disciples to preach the Gospel throughout the world, He said, “*beginning at Jerusalem*” (Lk 24:47) – which is the location of activity in our

day” (Acts 13:14-15).

- ⇒ The Gentiles that were reached in that area were also in the synagogue (Acts 13:42).
- ⇒ When they went into Iconium, they “*went into the synagogue of the Jews,*” and there “*a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed*” (Acts 14:1).
- ⇒ When Paul was called by the Lord into Macedonia, the first thing he did was go out on the Sabbath day to a river side, where certain devout women met for prayer. It was there that he confronted Lydia (Acts 16:13-14). In that area, when Paul and Silas had been released from prison, they first went to Lydia’s house, and met with the brethren there (Acts 16:40).
- ⇒ When entering into Thessalonica, Paul first “*reasoned*” with the Jews in the synagogue for three Sabbath days (Acts 17:1).
- ⇒ When they came into Berea, they “*went into the synagogue of the Jews*” (Acts 17:10).
- ⇒ When Paul came into Athens, he “*disputed in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him*” (Acts 17:17).
- ⇒ After coming to Corinth, he “*reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and Greeks*” (Acts 18:4).
- ⇒ When he entered Macedonia, Paul first “*testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ*” (Acts 18:5).
- ⇒ After being rejected by the Jews there, he went into the home of devout Jew named Justus, who lived next door to the synagogue. There “*Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized*” (Acts 18:7-8).
- ⇒ When Paul came to Ephesus, he “*entered into the synagogue, and*

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**AMONG THE PEOPLE**

“... *among the people.*” Every version reads the same, except the *God’s Word Translation*,<sup>GWN</sup> which omits the phrase.

**A Principle to be Seen**

When we read the words “*among the people,*” we must understand that they are not equivalent to “*among society in general.*” As used in this text, this phrase is often equated with speaking to those with no acquaintance of God, those who had plummeted into deep sin, or are generally unacquainted with the Bible. This is such a common perception that people often refer to Jesus Himself as always being around sinners – publicans, harlots, and the more degraded members of society. “*That,*” they ignorantly affirm, “*is where you would find the Lord today.*” **This stems from a completely erroneous view of the manner in which truth is**

text. Just before He ascended into heaven Jesus said to His disciples, “*ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth*” (Acts 1:8).

In the record of the spread of the Gospel, Christ’s ambassadors were most particular in following this approach, and it is duly noted in the book of Acts.

- ⇒ After being converted, Paul began preaching “*in the synagogues*” (Acts 9:20).
- ⇒ Following the Holy Spirit’s call of Barnabas and Saul, they “*preached the word of God in the synagogues*” (Acts 13:5).
- ⇒ When they went into Antioch of Pisidia in Asia Minor, they “*went into the synagogue on the Sabbath*

*reasoned with the Jews*" (Acts 18:19).

- ⇨ When Apollos came into Ephesus, he also *"began to speak boldly in the synagogue."* Although he *"knew only the baptism of John,"* it was there in the synagogue that he met Aquila and Priscilla, who *"expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly"* (Acts 18:24-26).
- ⇨ Paul remained for three months in Ephesus, *"disputing and persuading the things concerning the Kingdom" in the synagogue,* also ministering to the Gentiles there (Acts 19:8).
- ⇨ When the door of faith was opened to the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius, the Spirit makes note of the fact that he was *"a devout man, and one that feared God with his house"* (Acts 10:2).
- ⇨ In Thessalonica, certain *"devout Greeks"* and some *"chief"* women were the recipients of Paul's ministry (Acts 17:4).
- ⇨ In Athens Paul reasoned disputed with *"devout persons"* (Acts 17:17).

**There should be no need to recount these instances, for they are a matter of Scriptural record – and they are not at all ambiguous.** However amidst a staggering ignorance of the word of God, erroneous conceptions and emphases are being pawned off on the people of God. Statements are regularly made concerning Christ and the obligations of believers that have their genesis in the minds of men who are unlearned in the things of God. Furthermore, men are being judged, evaluated, and commended or condemned upon the basis of these erroneous suppositions.

**With remarkable consistency, the Scriptures confirm that the spreading of the Gospel consistently started among those with some knowledge of God, yet who were not cognizant of the truth of Christ.** Truth was first anchored in the minds of devout and stable people, and it spread from there. This was also true of the ministry of the Prophets, John the Baptist, and

our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. If a people will simply subject their minds to the Scriptures, it will not be possible to miss this emphasis.

**The strategy of the modern church is partly responsible for its deplorable condition.** It has majored preeminently on reaching what it calls "the lost," giving little or no heed to devout people who have an imperfect knowledge of the Lord. As a result, the church is filled with novices who have no working knowledge of Scripture.

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Consequently, owing to their supposed sincerity, certain things have crept into the church that are fundamentally of this world. This is because the larger part of the professing church is enveloped with spiritual ignorance. There are few converts of the caliber of Cornelius, or Lydia, or other Jews and devout people. **In other words, the nucleus of the church is weak, and that is a near-hopeless condition.** The fact that the professed leaders have allowed this to happen reveals the unacceptable level of their understanding.

The Gospel is called *"glad tidings of good things"* (Rom 10:15). But why is this so? Do not imagine that this suggests the message of the Gospel is primarily *good news* to the immoral, those enslaved by drugs, strong drink, and the likes. This is not *"good news"* to those whose marriages are falling apart, or whose children have gone astray, or who have lost all of their financial resources. **That is not the emphasis of the words "good news," and men do are wrong in suggesting that it is.** Paul said it most precisely when he announced in

Antioch, *"And we declare unto you glad tidings, how that the promise which was made unto the fathers, God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten Thee"* (Acts 13:31-32). The *"good news"* is not that you can be saved – although, for the humble and contrite soul, that is a refreshing announcement!

**The good news is what God has done, not what you can be!** That is

precisely what Paul said. This presumes some familiarity with what God has promised, as well as a longing for its fulfillment. In the case of devout people, it presumes they have come to see their need of the Lord, and long to be accepted by Him. **I do not believe you can establish that the Gospel can possibly be "glad tidings of good things" to anyone else.** This is why Paul preached as He did in Athens (Acts 17:22-31). He brought the people to a point where they saw their need of the Lord by reminding them they were made by God, were responsible to Him, and were going to be judged by his Son.

**When the fundamental objective of men is to rescue others from bad lifestyles, and to correct their behavior, they must, of necessity, turn their attention from Christ Jesus.** This is because Christ's primary work was to do the will of God. It is within the framework of that will that true human need is addressed.

#### Why Say These Things?

It may appear on the surface as though all of this is nothing more than a

distraction from the text. However, this is not the case at all. Our text is a sterling example of the very thing I have just sought to establish. When it is written that Stephen *“did great wonders and miracles among the people,”* the Jews are the people of reference. These were the people who had been cultured by Moses to have some acquaintance with the God of might. **They had been cultures for the day of salvation, with ALL Divine benefits being given to them** (Rom 9:4-5). Their history had been filled with examples of the signs and wonders that had been wrought in their behalf. No heathen God had ever worked in such a manner, or been represented as

working in such a way.

This was not a way Stephen had of simply getting the attention of the people. **Rather it was attesting that he was a man sent by God.** These *“great wonders and miracles”* were not mere displays of raw power. They doubtless brought some kind of benefit to the people, like the healing of the lame man (3:1-6), and the many healings that had been wrought by the apostles (5:16). He was not like a magician, performing feats of wonder before the people. That is not the nature of salvation, nor is it the manner of those who bring the good news of that salvation.

You see also in this that **Stephen’s ministry was of a public nature, confirming that he was not ashamed of the Gospel, and that the ability he had been given was genuine.** What now follows confirms that what Stephen **said** was the primary thing, **not** what he did. The *“great wonders and miracles”* that he *“did among the people”* **confirmed** that what he was saying was the truth – and that was the critical factor. **In the Divine economy, there is no point to a wonder-worker who does not have a unique and beneficial message.** Stephen was not simply ministering to the people, he was **primarily** representing the living God.

## THE FIRST CASE OF DISPUTATION

*“<sup>9</sup> Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing*

occurs in the book of Acts. **Among other things, this confirms the powerful reasoning that is contained in the Gospel.** When it is preached in purity and power, it is most difficult for those who

*called,”* <sup>AMPLIFIED</sup> and *“the synagogue, the ones being called Freed Slaves.”* <sup>ALT</sup>

**In the Jewish economy, and by Divine design, their religion was the heart of their culture. Family life, as fundamental as it was, was not the heart of their acculturation. The very existence of the synagogue was confirmation of this fact. The synagogue largely represented the religious life of the people.**

Once again, behold the locus, or locale, of Stephen’s ministry – **the synagogue**, where devout men were gathered. This was a particular synagogue within Jerusalem – *“the synagogue of the Libertines.”*

In the Jewish economy, and by Divine design, their religion was the heart of their culture. Family life, as fundamental as it was, was not the heart of their acculturation. The very existence of the synagogue was confirmation of this fact. The synagogue largely represented the religious life of the people. It was not a family center, entertainment center, or place of leisurely activity. Much of Christ’s ministry, as well of many of His great miracles, were performed in the synagogues (Matt 12:9; Mk 1:23; Lk 13:11). Some of his most marvelous words, concerning eating His flesh and drinking His blood, were spoken in the synagogue (John 6:44-59). This is where early believers frequently met, as confirmed by Saul of Tarsus seeking Christians there (Acts 9:2; 22:19; 26:11).

*with Stephen.”*

Following Christ’s ascension, and up to this point, no one speaking for the Lord had encountered an argument against the truth. A debate had never ensued that sought to disprove the truth of the Gospel. **Peter and John faced opposition, but not disputation** (4:1-2). Later, the apostles were incarcerated, threatened, and beaten – but none argued with them. Now, quite possibly as long as two years after Pentecost, a man full the Holy Spirit, wisdom, faith, and power, faces disputation. This is the first instance. In fact, this is the first time the word *“dispute”* in any of its varied forms,

do not receive it to contend with it.

### THE SYNAGOGUE – THE PLACE OF DISPUTATION

*“Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines . . .”* Other versions read, *“synagogue of the Freedmen,”* <sup>NKJV</sup> *“Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called),”* <sup>NIV</sup> *“the Synagogue named that of the Libertines,”* <sup>BBE</sup> *“called the Freedmen’s Synagogue,”* <sup>DARBY</sup> *“a synagogue called Freedmen’s Synagogue,”* <sup>GWN</sup> *“the Synagogue of Freed Slaves,”* <sup>NLT</sup> *“the Jewish cult of The Freedmen,”* <sup>LIVING</sup> *“the synagogue of the Freedmen (freed Jewish slaves), as it was*

### The origin of the Synagogue

The word *“synagogue”* means *“a bringing together, gathering . . . an assembling together.”* <sup>THAYER</sup> It is a parallel of the Greek word *ἐκκλησία*, which is translated *“church.”* Although Jewish tradition states that

synagogues were among the Jews from of old, there are no direct references of them in the writings of Moses and the Prophets. Jewish tradition affirms that when Nebuchadnezzar burned “*all the houses of Jerusalem*,” the reference was to 480 synagogues that existed in the city. <sup>Jerusalem Megillah, 3, 1</sup> This cannot be satisfactorily proved, but it does confirm how the synagogue came to be central in Jewish life.

It is generally understood that the synagogues arose during the exile, when the mass of Jews were no longer located in their own land. The Assyrians had captured the Israelites (2 Kgs 18:9-11), and the Babylonians had enslaved Judah (2 Kgs 14:11-16). Both captivities removed the people from their Temple and homeland. **However, it did not remove their Temple and homeland from their hearts.** We know that during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah there were solemn gatherings of the Jews (Ezra 8:15; Neh 8:2; 9:1; Zech 7:5). Furthermore, these became the occasion for instructing the people concerning the Law of God, and exhorting them to keep the laws of the Lord (Ezra 10:1-9; Neh 8:1; 9:1-3; 13:1-3). Jewish history affirms that these circumstances formed the beginning of the concept of a synagogue – **a gathering place where the people of God were subjected to the scriptures and taught.**

Thus the nature of true religion is unveiled by the people who were cultured by exposure to God’s law and will. **They saw a need to come together and expose their hearts and minds to what was available to them from God.** This was before the coming of Christ. It was, however, a frame of mind that must be possessed if any advantage from Christ is to be realized. **At some point, men must regard the company of the godly and the word of God to be worthy of extended effort, regardless of whether of not it is convenient.** The men who pioneered this effort were consistently godly men – generally prophets or priests. They were men who had seen the implication of God speaking to and directing men. **Those experiences imply that the emphasis of life lies outside of mere human experience.** Oh, that men were more able to see this in our time!

#### The Synagogue Firmly Established

By the time of Jesus’ birth, the synagogue was established as an integral part of Jewish life. Jesus Himself regularly attended the synagogue (Luke 4:16). It was wholly related to religious life, reflecting the nature of God’s dealings with them. Among serious Jews, there was no thought of religious life being in subordination to social life. **It was central.** If they had a special “*hour*,” it was for prayer, not for lunch or extracurricular activities (Acts 3:1). Now, in our time, under the domination of the Gentile church, this concept has all but been destroyed. It is no wonder that their predominance in this age of grace has an appointed conclusion, being called “*the times of the Gentiles*” (Lk 21:24). Under

place in the synagogue.

**Godly men must have contact with devout people in order to maintain their spiritual advancement, whether in defense of the truth, or in the matter of edification.** The newness of life, as experienced in this world, is calculated to develop in the midst of competing influences. In this way it is confirmed to the hearts of those possessing the life that God is “*greater than all*” (John 10:29). **Until a person experiences the victory that comes from faith (1 John 5:4-5), his religion is largely philosophical.** Faith, by its very nature, compels the individual to express that faith, even in a hostile arena. This is what we see taking

**One further observation: the synagogue was not something God commanded, yet it was something He received and honored. His Son honored it, and so did the apostles and the early church. Those who “forsake the assembling” of themselves together have fallen beneath the level of the ancient Jews, to say nothing of their Lord and Savior.**

their regime, religious buildings are largely devoted to secular purposes, entertainment, etc.

One further observation: **the synagogue was not something God commanded, yet it was something He received and honored.** His Son honored it, and so did the apostles and the early church. Those who “*forsake the assembling*” of themselves together have fallen beneath the level of the ancient Jews, to say nothing of their Lord and Savior. Such a miserable practice is indefensible. It contradicts both reason and revelation.

#### Stephen Speaks in the Synagogue

Here is a man filled with faith, wisdom, the Spirit, and power. Where will a man like this go? What kind of people will he address? Believe it or not, he took his message **inside the four walls** – where devout religious people were gathered! The account that follows took

place in this text.

#### The Libertines

The word “*libertine*” means “one who has been liberated from slavery, a freedman.” <sup>THAYER</sup> “a designation for a Jew who had gained freedom from slavery.” <sup>FRIBERG</sup>

These were people who had been slaves, but were freed. It is quite possible that they spoke in different languages because of their circumstance. However, they had not lost their interest in the Lord, and upon their freedom had either formed a synagogue, or one was formed for them while they were in Jerusalem.

**This also confirms the centrality of religious life to the Jews.** That centrality was not the result of their own emphasis, but was rather traced to the manner in which God Himself had cultured them. It is a national example of the domestic circumstance of raising a child “*in the nurture and admonition of*

the Lord” (Eph 6:4). In is inconceivable that the highest expression of the involvement of Deity with humanity – the New Covenant – would relegate spiritual activity to a lesser role than was inculcated under the Old Covenant.

### THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE DISPUTATION

“ . . . and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia . . .” Other translations read, “including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia,” <sup>NASB</sup> “Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia,” <sup>NIV</sup> “Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria in Egypt, and the Turkish provinces of Cilicia, and Asia Minor,” <sup>LIVING</sup> “(This synagogue was also for Jews from the cities of Cyrene and Alexandria.) Jews from Cilicia and Asia were with them,” <sup>IE</sup> “Cyrenaeans, Alexandrians, Cilicians and men from Roman Asia,” <sup>WEYMOUTH</sup> and “Cyrenians and of the Alexandrians and of those from Cilicia and [the province of] Asia,” <sup>AMPLIFIED</sup>

These people were all Jews, but were from other countries, and spoke different languages because of that circumstance.

It ought to be noted that at this time, even though a considerable number of Jews were living in the promised land, most of them remained in a state of dispersion. From an historical point of view, that dispersion was the result of the Assyrians and Chaldeans conquering them. As it is written, “Israel is a scattered sheep; the lions have driven him away: **first the king of Assyria hath devoured him; and last this Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon hath broken his bones**” (Jer 50:17). However, from the higher and more precise viewpoint, **God Himself** had scattered them because of their waywardness. There are a number of references made to this scattering in the Prophets.

⇨ “For I am with thee, saith the LORD, to save thee: though I make a full end of all nations whither I have scattered thee, yet will I not make a full end of thee: but I will correct thee in measure, and will not leave thee altogether unpunished” (Jer 30:11).

### ON LIBERTINES

The earliest explanation of the word (Chrysostom) is also that which has been adopted by the most recent authorities. The *Libertini* are Jews who, having been taken prisoners by Pompey and other Roman generals in the Syrian wars, had been reduced to slavery, and had afterwards been emancipated, and returned, permanently or for a time, to the country of their fathers. Of the existence of a large body of Jews in this position at Rome we have abundant evidence. Under Tiberius, the *Senatus-Consultum* for the suppression of Egyptian and Jewish mysteries led to the banishment of 4000 “libertini generis” to Sardinia, under the pretense of military or police duty, but really in the hope that the malaria of the island might be fatal to them. Others were to leave Italy unless they abandoned their religion (Tacitus, Anal. 2:85; comp. Sueton. Tiber. c. 36). Josephus (*Ant.* 18:3, 5), narrating the same fact, speaks of the 4000 who were sent to Sardinia as Jews, and thus identifies them with the “libertinum genus” of Tacitus. Philo (*Legat. ad Caium*, page 1014, C) in like manner says that the greater part of the Jews of Rome were in the position of freedmen *απελευθερωθέντες* and had been allowed by Augustus to settle in the Trans-Tiberine part of the city, and to follow their own religious customs unmolested (comp. Horace, *Sat.* 1:4, 143; 1:9, 70).

⇨ “Hear the word of the LORD, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock” (Jer 31:10).

⇨ “Therefore say, Thus saith the Lord GOD: Although I have cast them far off among the heathen, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come” (Ezek 11:16).

⇨ “And I scattered them among the heathen, and they were dispersed through the countries: according to their way and according to their doings I judged them” (Ezek 36:19).

⇨ “But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no

man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate” (Zech 7:14).

Now we are provided with a prelude to what God promised the whole of the people He would do – **gather them again**. As it is written, “Hear the word of the LORD, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, **He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock:**” (Jer 31:10). And again, “And I will bring you out from the people, and **will gather you out of the countries wherein ye are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out**” (Ezek 20:34).

To this very day, Israel remains scattered, with only a remnant dwelling in the promised land. The nation never did recover from the scattering facilitated by the king of Assyria and Nebuchadnezzar of the Chaldeans. **If anyone doubts that they can be gathered, the book of Acts begins with a first fruit offering of this very nation to the Lord.**

We are also reading of the Lord saving people **while they are in a scattered state**. He has drawn a number of them to Jerusalem in order to enlighten their eyes and confirm His promises to them. This ought to be of special comfort to those who are aware of the present scattered state of the church. While it is not a pleasant circumstance, it is not a hopeless one.

### The Kind of People Before Us

In our text we are provided a picture of how seriously a people cultured by God can take their religion – something provided them for understanding. It is important to note how vastly different that culture is from the present culture of the America church in particular, and the whole country in general. There are proportionately few of this kind of people in our quadrant of the world. However, this IS how people who have been exposed to the real God, and have taken it seriously, react. Even though these were not ideal people, they were a zealous people.

### They Came From various Areas

These freed slaves had come

from various areas, but had gravitated back to Jerusalem, no doubt to attend the feasts that were at hand. They may well have been in that number of “devout Jews out of every nation under heaven,” that are mentioned in Acts 2:5. The number included the following.

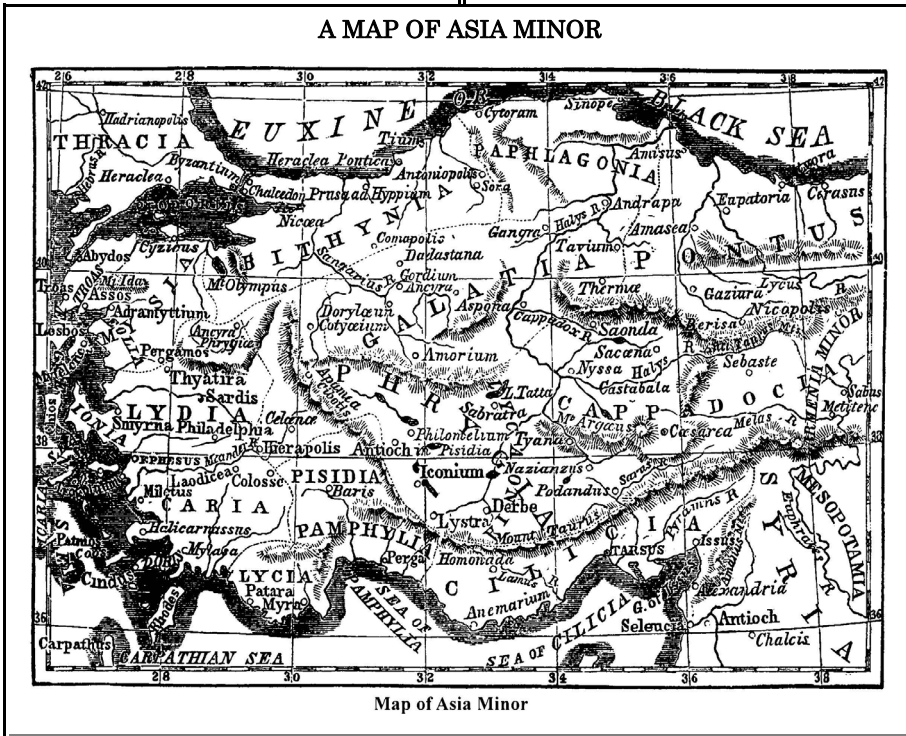
- ⇒ **CYRENIANS.** These were freed Jewish slaves from Cyrene, which was the chief city in **North Africa**.
- ⇒ **ALEXANDRIANS.** These were freed Jewish slaves from Alexandria in **Egypt**.

times (Acts 2:9; 6:9; 16:6; 19:10,22,26, 27,31; 20:4,16,18; 21:27; 24:18; 27:2; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Cor 1:8; 2 Tim 1:15; 1 Pet 1:1; Rev 1:4,11). We are told in the book of Acts that during Paul’s two year stay in Ephesus, “all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). Much of this was accomplished by Paul himself, as his enemies confirmed: “Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands” (Acts 19:26).

Other versions read, “rose up and argued with Stephen,”<sup>NASB</sup> “These began to argue with Stephen,”<sup>NIV</sup> “had arguments with Stephen,”<sup>BBE</sup> “came forward and disputed with Stephen,”<sup>CSB</sup> “started an argument with Stephen,”<sup>GWN</sup> “came forward and debated with Stephen,”<sup>NAB</sup> “They all came and argued with Stephen,”<sup>IE</sup> “were roused to encounter Stephen in debate,”<sup>WEYMOUTH</sup> “got to debating with Stephen,”<sup>WILLIAMS</sup> “arose [and undertook] to debate and dispute with Stephen,”<sup>AMPLIFIED</sup> and “tried debating with Stephen.”<sup>PHILLIPS</sup>

We know from other Scriptures that it was the custom of Jewish people to have others speak in their synagogues – particularly if they were obviously devout people. Thus, without personally knowing Paul, the rulers of a synagogue in Antioch of Pisida “after the reading of the law and the prophets . . . sent unto them, saying, Ye men and brethren, if ye have any word of exhortation for the people, say on” (Acts 13:15). In some way, this had occurred in the synagogue of the Libertines, and Stephen, conducting himself in decency and order, had been speaking. We are not told of his specific words, but they were doubtless in strict harmony with the words through which he himself had been converted since the day of Pentecost. They obviously centered in the Lord Jesus Christ, whom the Jews had crucified, and whom God had raised from the dead and exalted to His right hand. I do not doubt that his words were parallel with those that Peter and the apostles had been speaking (Acts 2:14-27; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:29-32).

A MAP OF ASIA MINOR



Map of Asia Minor

- ⇒ **CILICIA.** These were freed Jewish slaves from Cilicia, a province in **Asia Minor**, that was on the seacoast north of Cyprus.
- ⇒ **ASIA.** These were freed Jewish slaves from Asia Minor, an area that embraced Mysia (Acts 16:7-8), Aeolis, Ionia, Caria, and Lydia (Ezek 30:5). This was also the area in which the seven churches of Revelation were located (Rev 1:4).

The map shown here shows something of the size of Asia Minor, referred to as “Asia” in Scripture, where it is mentioned no less than twenty-one

That section of the world was noted for the worship of “Diana of the Ephesians” (Acts 19:27). Later Paul wrote to Timothy about the time he was in Asia, confessing that at that time “all they which are of Asia turned away from me” (2 Tim 1:15).

Now, in our text, a number of former Jewish slaves from that region will engage Paul in disputation. How will these former slaves react to the preaching of Stephen. Will we find them to be basically untaught because they were slaves?

**THE DISPUTATION**

“. . . disputing with Stephen.”

**Disputing**

Our text says these men “arose.” That is, the “rose up,”<sup>NASB</sup> “stood up,”<sup>NRSV</sup> or “came forward.”<sup>CSB</sup> It was the manner for the persons speaking to come forward and stand before the people to speak. That is what Jesus did (Lk 4:16). It is also what Paul did in Antioch (Acts 13:16). **Now, being no longer able to endure what Stephen was saying, these men come forward to began disputing with him, attempting to disprove what he was saying.**

At once you see that the synagogue was not only a place for formal teaching, but for examining an issue more closely that was not seen alike by all of the people. This practice would

frighten many would-be preachers from the pulpit. However, it did not have that effect upon Stephen.

To “dispute” means “to seek to examine together . . . to discuss, dispute, or question,”<sup>THAYER</sup> “debate, argue with,”<sup>FRIBERG</sup> “to express forceful differences of opinion without necessarily having a presumed goal of seeking a solution.”<sup>LOUW-NIDA</sup> **In other words, in such a discussion, the aim of the ones initiating the dispute is not to arrive at the truth. It is rather an attempt to justify a view that is already held, yet contradicts what the speaker has been saying.**

These were religious men, and they took their religion seriously – a religion that had been revealed by God

himself. Their presence in Jerusalem at this time confirms this to be true. Yet, they were not like the devout men on the day of Pentecost who cried out, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Instead they begin to argue with Stephen, disputing what he has said, seeking to undermine it, and establish their own way of thinking. How will this two-year-old disciple of Jesus be able to handle their disputation? Or will he shrink back from it, avoiding all controversy, as some are wont to do?

In a sense, these are Stephen’s Jewish fellows, coming from the same background as himself. It is assumed that because he was in this synagogue for freed slaves, that he himself was in that category. If this assumption is true, what

marvelous progress this man had made. A foreign-born slave, or son of a slave, who held on to “the Jew’s religion” (Gal 1:13,14), taking the time to travel to Jerusalem for the Passover. During that time he must have heard and believed the Gospel, and heartily embraced the truth. He rose above his peers, being recognized as an unusual man in both knowledge and commitment. Now he is in the synagogue of the Libertines so powerfully proclaiming the Gospel of Christ that some have stood up and began to oppose him, disputing with him. Apparently, he was speaking extensively.

How will this young man fare among these zealous Jewish brethren? Will his boldness wither, or will it increase?

## THEY WERE NOT ABLE TO RESIST

**“<sup>10</sup> And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.”**

Stephen does not back down from these men. **He does not extend the scepter of peace and give them some time to catch up to him in their understanding.** He does not tell them he is willing to consider their view of whatever they were disputing. He had been where they were, and already knew the ins and outs of their position. He had, like all believers, been “illuminated” (Heb 10:32). Like Caleb of old, he had “another spirit” (Num 14:24), and, for all practical purposes, that set him apart.

It appears from the text that Stephen waxed even more bold, and accelerated in his proclamation of the truth of Christ. In fact, as this account progresses it becomes very evident that this is precisely what happened. Some time later Paul will write to Timothy that those who “use the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves . . . great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 3:13). This is precisely what is being seen in Stephen. He began as a deacon, serving tables. Now we find him boldly declaring the word of the Lord in the face of contradiction and disputation.

### The Sacred Art of Holy Disputation

There is a place for proper disputation in the Kingdom of God. There are strong arguments that must be “cast down” (2 Cor 10:5), and mouths of

When Paul was first converted, “he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him” (Acts 9:29). Over ten years after the day of

**There is a sense in which the servants of God are in the marketplace of ideas. There comes a time when it is not enough to simply say, “Well, that is what I believe, and that is all there is to it.” At some point, the professing church must come to grips with erroneous ideas, dismantle them, and hold forth the truth of God as superior in every way.**

gainsayers that are to be “stopped” (Tit 1:11). One of the requirements of an elder is that he “may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers” (Titus 1:9). It was said of Apollos that he “mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, showing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ” (Acts 18:28). In a church world that is grasping after fame and records, this is certainly not the fashionable thing to do. But it is the godly thing to do!

Pentecost, when the apostles and elders met to consider the acceptance of the Gentiles, there was “much disputing.” Because of the hearts of the people, and the strong arguments that were presented, they concluded in perfect accord (Acts 15:7-22). In Athens, Paul “disputed . . . in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him” (Acts 17:17). In Ephesus Paul “went into the synagogue, and spake

boldly for the space of three months, **disputing and persuading** the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8). When some of the people were hardened *“he departed from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus”* (Acts 19:9).

**There is a sense in which the servants of God are in the marketplace of ideas.** There comes a time when it is not enough to simply say, “Well, that is what I believe, and that is all there is to it.” At some point, the professing church must come to grips with erroneous ideas, dismantle them, and hold forth the truth of God as superior in every way. It is to be understood that everyone cannot do this with the same effectiveness. However, there is a place for being ready to give an answer to every man that asks a reason for the hope that is in you (1 Pet 3:15).

In my judgment there are too many incapable and unlearned men in religious leadership. They have not gained *“excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus”* (1 Tim 3:13). **This is one of the reasons for the proliferation of error within the**

his own faithfulness in serving tables, through which he obtained *“great boldness in the faith,”* just as Paul said.

**THEY WERE NOT ABLE TO RESIST**

*“And they were not able to resist . . .”* Other versions read, *“they were unable to cope,”*<sup>NASB</sup> *“they could not stand up against,”*<sup>NIV</sup> *“they could not withstand,”*<sup>NRSV</sup> *“they were not able to get the better of him,”*<sup>BBE</sup> *“they couldn’t argue,”*<sup>GWN</sup> *“the Jews could not argue with him,”*<sup>IE</sup> *“found themselves quite unable to stand up against,”*<sup>PHILLIPS</sup> *“they wee no match for Stephen,”*<sup>CEV</sup> *“they could not refute him,”*<sup>GNB</sup> and *“they had no strength to stand against.”*<sup>LITV</sup>

Stephen was not simply an overpowering personality. He was a man *“full of faith and power,”* and the Holy spirit and wisdom as well. **The point here is that these men could not answer Stephen’s arguments.** He left them speechless. Peter would say he put them *“to silence”* (1 Pet 2:15). Paul would say he *“stopped”* their mouths (Tit 1:11). As Gamaliel would say, they *“could not overthrow it”* (Acts 5:39). As Isaiah said, every tongue that rose up against Stephen was *“condemned”* (Isa 54:17).

spirits. Let it be clear, **God is not honored by human stupidity, flawed words, and simplistic speech.** Those who speak for the Lord are to be men in understanding, and not speak as a child (1 Cor 13:11; 14:20). Even though men try to dignify childish talk, they cannot be successful in their attempts. Those who say that public speaking and writing should delivered so six year-olds can understand, betray a level of ignorance that is inexcusable. Christian writers are regularly told to dumb down their writings to a sixth-to-eighth grade level. What will they do if they encounter someone like the Libertines, the Pharisees, the scribes, or the lawyers? How would they speak if they stood before Athenian philosophers who had imbibed the high-sounding teaching of Socrates and Plato? What will they present to the aggressive atheists and evolutionists? **It is time to get childishness out of the pulpit, libraries, and bookstores.** Men of God are to be able to silence those who oppose the truth, not simply turn and walk away, leaving them to confuse other people.

**The truth of God is the highest and most stable substance of communication.** It challenges the mind more than any other message – although you would never know from many of the messages that are being delivered in Jesus’ name. When men heard the Lord Jesus speak, they said *“Never man spake like this man.”* Many of the men we hear today remind us of the way the world speaks. They use the jargon of the world, and use words and concepts that the world employs. They say they are trying to reach the world, but they are lying. They are trying to impress men, not reach them, for God has given us the message that will reach into the recesses of the heart. Stephen employed Divine reasoning, and put it into inspired language. He spoke of incontestable realities, and delivered the message in words that drove the point home to the heart. He did this wisely, not accommodatingly.

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**Christian community. It lacks competent men who can effectively dispute with these charlatans.** This is something that cannot be taught. It is learned in the crucible of service in which one keeps the faith and presses toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

It is good to keep in mind that Stephen was not an apostle, yet here he is, himself doing some of the things that the apostles also did. Some might conjecture that this was possible because the apostles had laid hands on him (Acts 6:16). I prefer to trace his effectiveness to

In Stephen the promise of Jesus was fulfilled, *“For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist”* (Luke 21:15). Although that word was spoken to only four men during the Olivet discourse, yet it was fulfilled in a man who was not even there – Stephen.

**God Is To Be Honored in Our Presentations**

Our God is to be honored by what we say in His name. Our presentations should solicit the attention of holy angels as well as men of humble and hungry hearts, and inquisitive

**THE WISDOM AND SPIRIT BY WHICH HE SPAKE**

*“ . . . the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.”* Other versions read, *“his wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke,”*<sup>NIV</sup> *“the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke,”*<sup>NRSV</sup> *“for his words*

were full of wisdom and of the Spirit,<sup>”BBE</sup> “because he spoke with the wisdom that the Spirit had given him,<sup>”GWN</sup> “because of his wisdom, and the Spirit that prompted what he said,<sup>”NJB</sup> “but the Spirit was helping Stephen speak with wisdom,<sup>”IE</sup> “the wisdom and the Spirit by which he kept speaking,<sup>”ISV</sup> “with his good practical sense and the spiritual power with which he usually spoke,<sup>”WILLIAMS</sup> “the intelligence and the wisdom and [the inspiration of the Spirit with which and by Whom he spoke,<sup>”AMPLIFIED</sup> “either his practical wisdom or the spiritual force with which he spoke,<sup>”PHILLIPS</sup> and “who spoke with the great wisdom that the Spirit gave him.<sup>”CEV</sup>

Two things are noted concerning Stephen. **They are things that were revealed in his speaking.** This is important to note. His dominate traits were not made known in his deeds, but in his speech. Although he was a faithful man, full of faith and power, together wisdom and the Holy Spirit, **it was what he said that became the ultimate attestation of the presence of those qualities.** This is in sharp conflict with the manner in which religious men are assessed in our time. Generally, with several exceptions, leading figures in the contemporary Christian community are **not** noted for what they actually teach or preach. Some are renowned for the institution they have built, or the organization they have spawned. Some may even be know for the acts of mercy in which they are involved. It is not that any of these things are wrong of themselves. Rather, it is important to know that **foundational figures within the body of Christ are to be noted for what they teach and preach.** This is because God placed “*first*” in the body of Christ apostles, prophets, and teachers. It is only “*after that*” that other ministries become valid and effective (1 Cor 12:28).

**“Wisdom”**

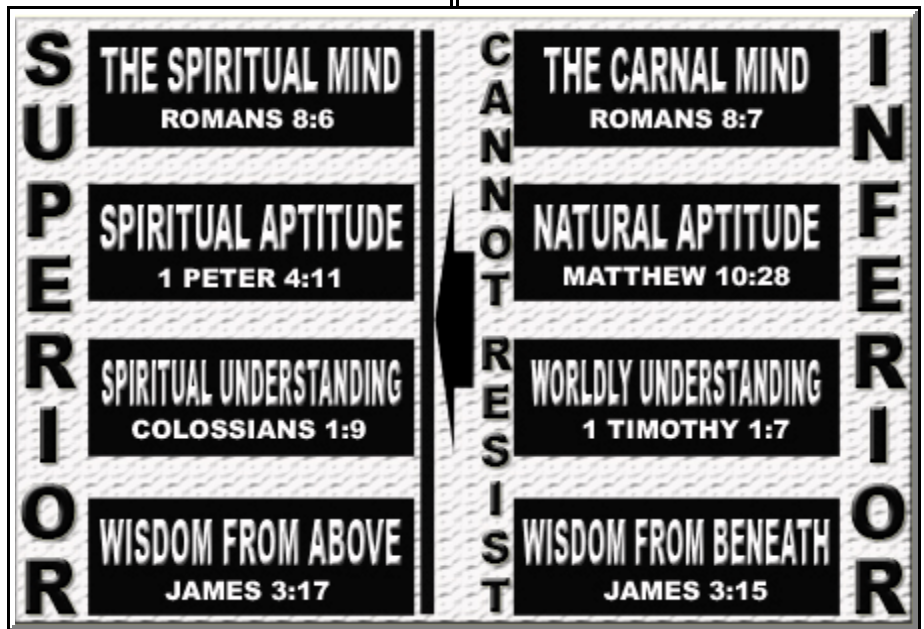
Stephen “*spoke*” with wisdom. That is, he was able to handle the truth in such a manner as to bring it to bear upon the conscience of the people. **Wisdom is the ability to handle words like David handled a sling, and Samson handled the jawbone of an ass.** It is the ability to speak the truth in a constructive manner, so that the purpose

of God is implemented.

In Christ, when men speak “*with wisdom,*” their teaching is impregnable, and cannot be torn down. It is the sort of teaching that is buttressed by the Holy Spirit, and through which He works upon the hearts of men, convincing them of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8-11). **This is a different order of wisdom, and is a higher kind of wisdom than that which was given to Solomon.** This is a wisdom that has more to do with eternal matters than temporal circumstances. It is a wisdom flowing from Christ, who is “*great than Solomon*” (Matt 12:42). This kind of wisdom is described as “*the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding*” (Col 1:9). In other words, it has to do with insight into the “*eternal purpose*” of God, and the ability to expound the Scriptures in view of that immutable purpose.

Stephen, of course, was not discoursing concerning the various nuances of synagogue life. He was not addressing the matter of having more stable finances, integrating with society, or other such matters. He certainly was not delivering teaching on how to have better health and obtain much wealth. Such teaching would probably have been tolerated by the people of this synagogue. It ought to be obvious that a man “*full of faith and power,*” who is doing “*great wonders and miracles among the people,*” would not be inclined to speak at length about such matters.

The wisdom with which Stephen spoke did not convince the people of the truth of what he said, as the sequence of events that followed confirm. However, the people could not tear his arguments apart. They could not effectively contend with him, or present arguments that



Those who are recognized as especially wise men in matters pertaining to marriage, finance, motivation, organization, problem resolution, and the likes, possess a wisdom that is more of the Solomonic order than of Christ. Those with the higher order of wisdom are not ignorant in these areas. They do, however, approach them at a more foundational level, having a more thorough perception of earthly circumstances.

neutralized even the smallest part of what he was proclaiming.

**“The Spirit”**

Here, the reference is not to Stephen’s spirit, but to the Holy Spirit. This is seen in the very words of the text: “*the Spirit BY which he spake*” – **not**, in which he spake. Stephen’s spirit was indeed strong, and it was projected in both the content of what he said, as well as the fervency and force of it. **However,**

it was the Holy Spirit who strengthened his inner man, thereby fortifying both his reasoning and his words. Rather than the disputers putting Stephen to silence with their rebuttals, he silenced them. It ought to be obvious that this was not primarily the accomplishment of his human spirit. This is an explanation of the “power” with which Stephen had been filled, and therefore cannot possibly refer to any natural aptitude or fervency within him.

What a difference there is between “spiritually minded” (Rom 8:6)

Faith can mount up with the wings of the eagle, while flesh must burrow in the ground of sense and time.

The truth itself is impervious to error. When men attempt to distort it, their efforts fail. Although it may appear men have thrust the truth out of sight, as it appeared to be during The Dark Ages, yet all it takes is an honest and good heart mingled with faith, and it can be seen so clearly it seems inconceivable that it was ever hidden.

Although it has become

to do is create variant ways of thinking, and throw doubt upon the Scriptures that are in the hands of the people. The scientist tries to open up the truth by paralleling it with nature, yet finds that nature’s bag is too small to contain the truth of God. What can be “understood by the things that are made” (Rom 1:20) is not enough to justify a man, or enable him to stand acceptably before the Lord of the creation. The archaeologist makes an earnest effort to prove the Scripture by various historical finds, unearthing ancient cities and artifacts. Yet, there is not a grain of faith that can be produced by all of their accumulative efforts, for faith comes by hearing what the Lord has said, not what they have found. The apologists imagine they can send the skeptics scurrying to the holes of despair by their ontological arguments for the existence of God, but the Holy Spirit does not work through their arguments to convince the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment.

Stephen’s wisdom was the result of His faith. He was walking in the Spirit and in the light, and was thus illuminated. His mind attained to a state that was not possible through any man-conceived means. He saw things flesh cannot see. Therefore, his words were like festering arrows that frustrated those who sought to contend with him. They simply could not stand against the wisdom with which he spoke. The gale of his words was too strong for them. Thus they fell backward, so to speak, like those who came to arrest Jesus in the Garden (John 18:6).

There is no justifiable reason for such men to be so glaringly absent from the church of our time.

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and “the carnal mind” (Rom 8:7); between natural aptitude (Matt 10:28) and spiritual aptitude (1 Pet 4:11); between “spiritual understanding” (Col 1:9) and worldly understanding (1 Tim 1:7); between the “wisdom that is from above” (James 3:17) and the “wisdom of this world” (James 3:15). Those who reason in the Spirit soar beyond the capabilities of the flesh, or natural aptitude. They can see things that cannot be accessed by the human eye, and sense things that cannot be ascertained by the natural senses.

fashionable for men to attempt to join the wisdom of the world with the wisdom that comes down from above, their efforts have not yielded satisfactory results. For example, in the area of logic, men attempt to prove the Scripture by human reasoning, or certain laws of hermeneutics. Yet, all they do is throw the veil of obscurity over the truth, both for themselves and those who hear them. The linguists make a hearty effort to support the Scripture with Greek and Hebrew expertise. Yet, all they manage

## THEY SUBORNED MEN

“<sup>11a</sup> Then they suborned men which said. . .” Other versions read, “They secretly induced men to say,”<sup>NKJV</sup> “they secretly persuaded some men to say,”<sup>NIV</sup> “they secretly instigated some men to say,”<sup>NRSV</sup> “The they got men to say,”<sup>BBE</sup> “Then they bribed some men to lie,”<sup>GWN</sup> “Then they sent men, and instructed them to say,”<sup>MRD</sup> “So they

procured some men to say,”<sup>NJB</sup> “Then they privately prepared men, which said,”<sup>PNT</sup> “So they brought in some men to lie about him,”<sup>LIVING</sup> “So they secretly paid some men to say,”<sup>IE</sup> “So they [secretly] instigated and instructed men to say,”<sup>AMPLIFIED</sup> “In desperation they bribed men to allege,”<sup>PHILLIPS</sup> and “So they talked some men into saying,”<sup>CEV</sup>

What will these religious men do when they are faced with words they cannot overthrow. Will they be like those on the day of Pentecost who cried out, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Will they be like the five thousand men who believed after hearing Peter preach on the same Jesus Stephen proclaimed? (Acts 4:4). Stricken with a

*A righteous man is opposed, even though his opponents cannot resist his wisdom – by Given O. Blakely*

sense of their folly, will they cry out like the Philippian jailor, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:31).

Indeed, they will not! Even though they have heard a reasonable message, and have not been able to find a single flaw in it, yet their hearts are so corrupt, they cannot accept it. They were like certain Jews who heard Jesus, of whom it is written, "Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them" (John 12:39-40). They will not yield to the truth, but will accelerate their efforts to oppose it.

**THE REASON FOR SPIRITUAL DECLINE**

There are two primary reasons for their response, and they are joined with one another. First, their hearts were "stony" (Ezek 11:19), and thus their "mind and conscience" were defiled (Tit 1:15). Second, God had blinded their eyes so they could not believe (Isaiah 29:10).



**The Way Delineated**

There is a certain sequence that led those disputing with Stephen into this condition, and it is revealed in God's dealings with wayward Israel. The Lord speaks quite candidly on this matter. The twenty-ninth chapter of Isaiah plots the downward path of Israel, and Jesus uses the passage to explain why the Jews He confronted could not believe.

⇒ The people had lapsed into a state where they honored God with the lips, while their hearts were far from Him. Their fear of Him was taught by the precept of man, and there was neither heart nor conscience in it (Isa 29:13). This took place even though God had sent them holy prophets, commissioning them "early," in order to turn the hearts of the people back to Him. Yet, they did not hear (Jer 7:13,25; 26:5,19; 32:33; 35:15).

⇒ Therefore, the Lord "poured out" upon them "the spirit of deep sleep," closing their eyes, and covering the eyes of the prophets so they could not prophesy (Isa 29:10). John said He "blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts" (John 12:39a).

⇒ The result of this was that the Scriptures became a sealed book, and none of the people could understand them (Isa 29:11). John said that the consequence was they "could not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted" (John 12:40). John provides this scenario as the reason "they could not believe" (John 12:39).

⇒ As a result of this inability to believe, Satan gains the absolute dominance over such individuals, "who are taken captive by him at his will" (1 Tim 2:26). They now enter into a totally irrational life in which the truth is stifled at any cost, as they become nothing more than vassals in the hands of the devil.

This is why the Jews killed their prophets who came to rescue them from the ravages of sin. This is why Judas betrayed Jesus, and it is also why their leaders promoted and facilitated the death of Christ, even though He had gone about "doing good, and healing all who were oppressed of the devil" (Acts 10:39).

Now, this same process of degradation moves the men in the synagogue of the Libertines to take matters into their own hands. **They cannot resist what Stephen has said, so they will engage in an effort to misrepresent him before the people.** The

"chief priests and elders" engaged in the same activity as they plotted the death of Jesus. They "sought false witnesses against Jesus, to put Him to death" (Matt 26:59).

**SUBORNING FALSE WITNESSES**

In this effort, not being able to find fault with Stephen, or to overthrow his words, they will "suborn" men. The word "suborn" means "to instruct privately, instigate, to bribe or induce (someone) unlawfully or secretly to perform some misdeed or commit a crime; to induce (a person) to give false testimony," THAYER and "hiring someone to do something illegal." FRIBERG

The truth is so invasive to the mind of the flesh, that it will go to any length to escape the Word's hammering blows. Like Judas, they are now in the grip of Satan. Their disdain for the truth as it is in Jesus has compelled God to give them over to the arch-foe, and he goes to work in them immediately, seeking to stop the spread of the truth.

**PSALMIC REPRESENTATIONS**

This manner of the wicked is frequently mentioned in the Psalms. We find there most vivid representations of the aggression of those who hate the truth and those who speak it. These texts are being lived out in the opposition that is now being fomented against Stephen.

⇒ "The wicked . . . He sitteth in the lurking places of the villages: in the secret places doth he murder the innocent: his eyes are privily set against the poor" (Psa 10:8).

⇒ "For, lo, the wicked bend their bow, they make ready their arrow upon the string, that they may privily shoot at the upright in heart" (Psa 11:2).

⇒ "Pull me out of the net that they have laid privily for me: for thou art my strength" (Psa 31:4).

⇒ "The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth" (Psa 37:12).

⇒ "They only consult to cast him down from his excellency: they delight in lies: they bless with their mouth, but they curse inwardly. Selah" (Psa

62:4).

⇒ “They encourage themselves in an evil matter: **they commune of laying snares privily**; they say, Who shall see them?” (Psa 64:5).

⇒ “When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then thou knewest my

path. In the way wherein I walked have they **privily laid a snare for me**” (Psa 142:3).

**This is the extent to which one will go who has consistently resisted the truth, and is finally faced with a deluge of it that he cannot bear.** Under the domination of Satan he will resort of

fabrication and deceit in order to bring down the righteous.

The godly should not be surprised when men resort to lying to misrepresent them. In so doing, they are nothing more than vassals of the devil, who “*abode not in the truth,*” and vigorously promotes the lie (John 8:44).

## WE HEARD HIM SPEAK

“ 11b . . . **We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.**” Other versions read, “He has said evil against Moses and against God, in our hearing.”<sup>BBE</sup> “We heard him slander Moses and God.”<sup>GWN</sup> “We heard him using blasphemous language against Moses and against God.”<sup>NJB</sup> “We have heard him speaking evil savings in regard to Moses and God,”<sup>YLT</sup> “claiming they had heard Stephen curse Moses, and even God.”<sup>LIVING</sup> “We have heard him speaking abusive words against Moses and God.”<sup>WILLIAMS</sup> “We have heard this man speak, using slanderous and abusive and blasphemous language against Moses and God.”<sup>AMPLIFIED</sup> and “We have heard this man making blasphemous statements against Moses and against God.”<sup>PHILLIPS</sup>

What they said they heard is not what came out of Stephen’s mouth, but were the conclusions that they reached about what he said. At the very best it was an erroneous interpretation, and yet it was every whit a lie. And, like the

soldiers who kept the vigil at Jesus’ tomb, they were paid to deliver their lying words. Thus it is written, “*And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept. And if this come to the governor’s ears, we will persuade him, and secure you. So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day*” (Matt 28:12-15). The witnesses against Stephen also took their place with those who bore false witness against Jesus saying, “We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands” (Mark 14:58).

Later, Paul experienced the same kind of slanderous report. “*And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? whose damnation is just*” (Rom 3:8). Jude also

spoke of those who misrepresented the Gospel, making it a justification for further involvement in sin: “*For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, **turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness,** and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Jude 1:4).

**It should not surprise us that those under the domination of the devil would resort to lies to justify their opposition to the truth.** Jesus said to certain hard-hearted Jews, “*Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. **When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it***” (John 8:44).

Suffice it to say, those who are overcome by the devil assume his attributes, and conduct themselves after his despicable manner.

## THEY STIRRED UP THE PEOPLE

“ 12a **And they stirred up the people . . .**” Other versions read, “*and the people . . . were moved against him,*”<sup>BBE</sup> “*And they roused the people,*”<sup>DARBY</sup> “*Thus they moved the people.*”<sup>GENEVA</sup> “*The liars stirred up trouble among the people.*”<sup>GWN</sup> “*And they excited the people,*”<sup>MRD</sup> “*They incited the people,*”<sup>NET</sup> “*Having turned the people against him,*”<sup>NJB</sup> “*This accusation roused the crowds to fury against Stephen,*”<sup>LIVING</sup> and “*At the same*

*time they worked upon the feelings of the people.*”<sup>PHILLIPS</sup>

The “*they*” refers to the men who had been secretly bribed and instructed to bare false witness against Stephen. Now, armed with false report, they began circulating among the people and stirring them up – agitating them with their lies about the man of God. This is the same thing the leaders of the people did when

they delivered Jesus to be crucified. Those being stirred up were the ordinary people, who could be easily swayed and provoked when they thought someone was tampering with their religious customs. When Jesus was before Pilate, “*chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Jesus*” (Matt 27:20). Mark says “*the chief priests moved the people, that he should rather*

*A righteous man is opposed, even though his opponents cannot resist his wisdom – by Given O. Blakely*

release *Barabbas unto them*" (Mark 15:11).

This tactic was also used by the Jews against Paul in Antioch. *"But the Jews stirred up the devout and honorable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts"* (Acts 13:50). The same thing happened in Iconium: *"But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren"* (Acts 14:2). Even in Thessalonica, the Jews were forward to stir up the people against Paul: *"But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an*

*uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people"* (Acts 17:5). Again it is written, *"But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also, and stirred up the people"* (Acts 17:13). Jews from Asia even pursued Paul to Jerusalem and stirred up the people against him. *"And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him"* (Acts 21:27). Concerning Stephen, this whole matter was instigated by Satan who is *"the accuser of the brethren"* (Rev 12:10). He consistently seeks to stir up trouble in the area where the truth of God is being effectively proclaimed.

Korah aroused two hundred and fifty men against Moses (Num 16:1-3). The ten spies fomented a rebellion among the people that resulted in well over half-a-million people being excluded from the promised land (Num 32:9-11).

The Lord leaves no doubt concerning the state of a person who sows seeds of discord – particularly when they are against those who are speaking the truth. Among the "seven things" that the Lord *"hates,"* Solomon lists *"A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren"* (Prov 6:19). So far as men were concerned, this opposition was caused by a party spirit in which the organization is valued above the truth itself. Those possessing this spirit are more readily used by Satan.

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## THEY CAME, CAUGHT, AND BROUGHT

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<sup>12b</sup> . . . *and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council."* Other versions read, *"came upon him and seized him,"* <sup>NKJV</sup> *"came upon him and dragged him away,"* <sup>NASB</sup> *"they seized Stephen,"* <sup>NIV</sup> *"then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him,"* <sup>NRSV</sup> *"the Jewish leaders arrested him and brought him,"* <sup>LIVING</sup> *"They became so angry that they came and grabbed Stephen. Then they took him to the Jewish council,"* <sup>IE</sup> *"At length they came upon him, seized him with violence, and took him,"* <sup>WEYMOUTH</sup> *"Then they rushed at him, grabbed him, and brought him"* <sup>ISV</sup> and *"Then they suddenly confronted Stephen, seized him and marched him off before the Sanhedrin."* <sup>PHILLIPS</sup>

It had not been long since the Jewish authorities had arrested the apostles *"without violence, for they feared the people"* (5:26). Things had escalated since then, and such a fear is not present among these Libertines. There is no reservation within them. Therefore, being unable to resist the wisdom and Spirit by whom Stephen spoke, they rush upon him, and seizing him with violence, *"brought him to the council."* They are doing this to put him on trial.

This is now the fifth time *"the council"* and Jewish authorities have been found involved in opposition to the truth of Christ (Acts 4:6,15,23; 5:21-41). **Although they have already been exposed**

**to a considerable amount of Gospel from Peter and the apostles, it has not lessened their spiritual obtuseness.** As evil men and seducers are wont to do, they are growing *"worse and worse"* (2 Tim 3:13).

Things were so corrupt among the Jewish leaders that the word of Issiah was being fulfilled among them. *"Yea, truth faileth; and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey: and the LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no judgment"* (Isa 59:15). Let it be clear that when men begin to reject the truth, there is no way of knowing how low they will stoop to get their own way. There is no known limit to the wickedness they are capable of doing.

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## THEY SET UP THE FALSE WITNESSES

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<sup>13</sup> **And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law . . .** Other versions read, *"This man incessantly speaks against this holy place, and the Law,"* <sup>NASB</sup> *"fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the*

*law,"* <sup>NIV</sup> *"This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,"* <sup>RSV</sup> *"This man never stops saying bad things about the holy place and Moses' Teachings,"* <sup>GWN</sup> *"This man ceaseth not to utter words contrary to the law, and against this holy place,"* <sup>MRD</sup> *"This man is always speaking against the holy*

*Temple and against the law of Moses,"* <sup>NLT</sup> *"This one doth not cease to speak evil sayings against this holy place and the law,"* <sup>YLT</sup> *"Stephen was constantly speaking against the Temple and against the laws of Moses,"* <sup>LIVING</sup> *"This man never stops making statements against this sacred place and the Law [of Moses],"*

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*A righteous man is opposed, even though his opponents cannot resist his wisdom – by Given O. Blakely*

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AMPLIFIED and *“This man's speeches are one long attack against this holy place and the Law.”*<sup>PHILLIPS</sup>

The words *“this holy place”* refer to the Temple itself. *“The law”* refers more to the customs and ceremonial law than to the Ten Commandments.

These words are calculated to stir up people who take pride in their nation, and tend to think of themselves as being singularly blessed by having the Temple and a moral and ceremonial code. They do not rejoice in the Lord, or take delight in the truth. It is tradition and empty ceremonialism that satisfies these men. They have not received the love of the truth, but are quite willing to coast along in the frail vessel of man's tradition.

Religious persecutors are the most serious of all, for they have associated their opposition to men and women of God with their own imagined devotion to the Lord. When there is any suggestion, whether by express statement or by insinuation, that there is something more to be seen than what is embraced by their institution, they at once oppose it. **That is the nature of sectarianism**

In this case, they had been disputing with Stephen. Even though they could not refute what he was saying, they proceeded as though he was wrong and they were right. Since they could not punch holes in what he said, they concocted false charges against him, saying that he was opposed to Moses and the customs of the law. They make no

accurate reference to the words he spoke about Jesus, but represented him as merely disrupting their customs and degrading Moses – neither of which was true. They were, in every sense of the word, *“false witnesses.”* That is how hard and insensitive false religion can make a person! It stops the ears, blinds the eyes, callouses the heart, and dulls the conscience.

By making these charges, they were fulfilling their own Scriptures. *“Deliver me not over unto the will of mine enemies: for false witnesses are risen up against me, and such as breathe out cruelty”* (Psa 27:12). *“False witnesses did rise up; they laid to my charge things that I knew not”* (Psa 35:11). *“Every day they wrest my words: all their thoughts are against me for evil”* (Psa 56:5).

## THE WITNESS AGAINST STEPHEN

***“<sup>14</sup> For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.”*** Other versions read, *“for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”*<sup>NASB</sup> *“For he has said in our hearing that this Jesus of Nazareth will put this place to destruction and make changes in the rules which were handed down to us by Moses.”*<sup>BBE</sup> *“For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the traditions which Moses delivered unto us.”*<sup>DARBY</sup> *“For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the ordinances, which Moses gave us.”*<sup>GENEVA</sup> *“For we have heard him say, that this Jesus the Nazarene will destroy this place, and will change the rites which Moses delivered to you.”*<sup>MRD</sup> *“We have heard him say that this fellow Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple, and throw out all of Moses' laws.”*<sup>LIVING</sup> and *“For we have heard him say that this Jesus the Nazarene will tear down and destroy this place, and will alter the institutions and usages which Moses transmitted to us.”*<sup>AMPLIFIED</sup>

The false witnesses that testified at the trial of Jesus said they had heard Him say, *“I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days”* (Matt 26:61). When Jesus was hanging on the cross, the people hurled this same accusation at Him. *“And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross”* (Matt 27:39-40). What Jesus had actually said, as well as its meaning, is recorded in John 2:18-21. *“Then answered the Jews and said unto Him, What sign showest Thou unto us, seeing that Thou doest these things? Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this*

*temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body”* (John 2:18-21).

One might wonder why Jesus did not clarify this to the people. There is a reason for Him not doing this. **Because of the hardness of the heart of the people, Jesus spoke in such a manner as to bring out their wickedness.** He so veiled the truth that it would sound foolish to the carnally minded, and they would lash out against it – even scoffing at it. This Divine manner was revealed through Isaiah the prophet. *“But the word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken”* (Isa 28:13). This is another

**Because of the hardness of the heart of the people, Jesus spoke in such a manner as to bring out their wickedness. He so veiled the truth that it would sound foolish to the carnally minded, and they would lash out against it – even scoffing at it.**

*A righteous man is opposed, even though his opponents cannot resist his wisdom – by Given O. Blakely*

reason why *“it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Heb 10:31).

Now these false witnesses say

**face from the world.** It is not wise to represent Scripture as saying all of our enemies will obviously fail in their opposition to us, and we will always apparently defeat them. When the

wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented” (Heb 11:37). One of the members of the church in Pergamos is described by Jesus as *“Antipas . . . my faithful martyr”* (Rev 2:13). Jesus candidly told His disciples, *“And ye shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends: and some of you shall they cause to be put to death”* (Luke 21:16). Paul spoke for the apostles when he wrote, *“For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men”* (1 Cor 4:9). Quoting from Psa 44:22, Paul also said, *“As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter”* (Rom 8:36).

**There is a certain hostility that exists between the people of God and those who have adopted false and sterile religion. It is our business not to be naive about these things.**

that Stephen is preaching the very same thing they said Jesus affirmed. This saying did occur early in His ministry, and the people never got over it. Three years after He said it, speaking of His own resurrection from the dead, they hurled it in His teeth as he hung upon the cross, suspended between heaven and earth. Now, they falsely accuse Stephen of declaring the same message.

**SOMETHING TO BE LEARNED**

Here is a case where a false accusation is raised against a man of God, and it appears as though the accusers will win. **We should learn from this not to be naive about the opposition we**

Scriptures declare, *“No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness is of me, saith the LORD”* (Isa 54:17), **it is referring to ultimate outcomes.** Cain killed righteous Abel (Gen 4:25). Zachariah the prophet was slain between the Temple and the altar (2 Chron 24:20-22; Matt 23:35). Jezebel killed the prophets of the Lord (1 Kgs 18:13). Herod killed James the brother of John with the sword (Acts 12:2). A whole host of saints *“were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they*

**There is a certain hostility that exists between the people of God and those who have adopted false and sterile religion.** It is our business not to be naive about these things.

Those who handle the Word of God must not leave the people with the impression that their enemies will never give them trouble, or that they will openly triumph over every foe while they remain in this world. This is emphatically not true.

**THEY SAW HIS FACE**

*“<sup>15</sup> And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.”* Other versions read, *“his face looked like the face of an angel,”*<sup>BBE</sup> *“his face appeared to them like the face of an angel,”*<sup>NJB</sup> *“his face became as bright as an angel’s,”*<sup>NLT</sup> *“saw Stephen’s face become as radiant as an angel’s,”*<sup>LIVING</sup> *“they saw his face looking just like the face of an angel,”*<sup>WEYMOUTH</sup> and *“his face had the appearance of the face of an angel,”*<sup>AMPLIFIED</sup>

**LOOKING STEADFASTLY ON HIM**

*“And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him . . .”* Other versions read, *“fixing their gaze upon him,”*<sup>NASB</sup> *“looked intently at Stephen,”*<sup>NIV</sup> *“gazing at him,”*<sup>RSV</sup> *“fastening their*

*eyes upon him,”*<sup>ASV</sup> *“stared at him,”*<sup>GWN</sup> and *“glared at him.”*<sup>ISV</sup> As Stephen stood before this wicked council, they fixed their eyes upon him. **Their gaze was not one of inquiry, but of hatred and malice.** They saw him as a threat to their religious system, and did not have the slightest regard for him personally, or the Jesus that he preached. They were not looking with sympathy upon him, or with a mind to consider what he might say. **This was the look of contempt.** In his own measure, Stephen was experiencing what prophesied of, and endured by, the Lord Jesus: *“they look and stare upon me”* (Psa 22:17).

**AS THE FACE OF AN ANGEL**

*“ . . . saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.”* Other versions

read, *“his face looked like the face of an angel,”*<sup>BBE</sup> *“his face appeared to them like the face of an angel,”*<sup>NJB</sup> *“his face became as bright as an angel’s,”*<sup>NLT</sup> *“saw Stephen’s face become as radiant as an angel’s,”*<sup>LIVING</sup> *“they saw his face looking just like the face of an angel,”*<sup>WEYMOUTH</sup> and *“his face had the appearance of the face of an angel,”*<sup>AMPLIFIED</sup>

As they stared at Stephen they saw a physical token of his innocence. There was no look of guilt upon him, as there was upon Peter the night he denied Jesus three times. Stephen’s face was a testimony that the council would have done well to heed.

And how does an angel’s face appear? We have some examples in

Scripture. Once, when an angel appeared to Daniel, it is written *"his face" was "as the appearance of lightning"* (Dan 10:6). When a holy angel came down to the tomb from which Jesus had risen, he rolled away the stone and sat upon it. It is said of that angel, *"his countenance was, like lightning"* (Matt 28:3). When John received the vision of the Revelation on the Isle of Patmos, he saw an angel, *"and his face was as it were the sun"* (Rev

10:1). **This denoted both the purity and the glory of the holy angels.** I gather that the face of Stephen being as that of an angel also spoke of his purity and glory, of his holiness, and power.

**This was an evidence that the council was witnessing a man who was full of the Holy Spirit.** The witness of his face was evidence that they were wrong and Stephen as right. They should have

called an abrupt conclusion to their wicked assembly. However, they could not do so, for they were *"in the bond of iniquity"* (Acts 8:23).

At this point, Stephen was like a city set on a hill, and a candle placed on a candlestick so all could see (Matt 5:14-15). Now, the examination of Stephen will begin. However, we will find that Stephen himself will examine them.

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## CONCLUSION

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We have been exposed to the aggressiveness of the flesh, and the unbridled hostility of lifeless religion. When people think they are of God, yet really are not, they become a weapon in the hand of the devil. There is no way to

adequately portray the seriousness of a *"form of godliness"* that *"denies the power thereof."* It is what moved Cain to kill Abel, and the Jews to kill their prophets, murder Jesus, and oppose the twelve apostles and Paul. Let every person who

confesses Christ declare war on any approach to religion that causes people to reject the truth and oppose those who declare it. Too, let no follower of Christ stand in amazement that they are opposed by religious peers.

**Our next Hungry Saints Meeting will be held on Friday, 5/13/2007. We will continue our current series of lessons on the book of Acts. The Twenty-eighth lesson will cover verses 1 through 8 of the seventh chapter: "STEPHEN'S DEFENSE, #1." Having heard Stephen preach, and being unable to resist, or thrown down, his wisdom, his enemies have hired some false witnesses to testify against him. Luke records the false charges they leveled at Stephen. Our meeting will begin at 7:00 P.M. You are invited to bring your family and friends for fellowship around the Word of God. Refreshments are served afterward, with a time of extended fellowship for everyone.**

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*A righteous man is opposed, even though his opponents cannot resist his wisdom – by Given O. Blakely*

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"THE WORD OF TRUTH"  
RADIO BROADCAST**

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**Beginning Monday, April 30<sup>th</sup>, at 4:00 PM  
Broadcast will be featured Monday through Friday at  
4:00 PM. A broadcast designed to clarify the nature  
and content of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.**