

## Bible Study 23 - Acts 7:1-53 - Stephen's Apologia

Text: 51 “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

1. Stephen’s apologia answers his accusers:

- a) It is a response to specific allegations or accusations made against him...
- b) It is a retort to the unjust treatment meted out to him...
- c) It is a righteous appeal for repentance and faith...

2. Stephen’s apologia demonstrates scriptural acuity (clarity):

- a) Stephen makes an authentic defence... based on scripture, based on the person and work of Jesus Christ, based on the apostolic revelation through the Spirit, based on his own observation and experience...
- b) Stephen makes an authoritative defence... He is a servant of Christ – the Word made flesh, the Son of God, the King of kings... and the word of the living God which is the church’s ultimate rule in matters of faith and morals...
- c) Stephen makes an apostolic defence for he speaks not merely on the basis on individual or private opinion but on the grounds of the apostolic and catholic faith...

3. Stephen’s apologia therefore seeks to show scriptural accuracy:

- a) Stephen seeks to show the church’s continuity through the children of Israel...
- b) Stephen seeks to show the church’s canonical faithfulness... And indirectly reminds us here of the progressive nature of God’s revelation in the Bible and the interconnectedness of all its parts.
- c) Stephen seeks to show the church as the custodians of the faith...

4. Stephen’s apologia turns the table on his adversaries:

a) Stephen is in effect saying that they are arguing and acting contrary to God's revealed will... On course, God's revealed will had foretold or prophesied such a thing – the rejection of God's Christ, his condemnation, crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension... and the persecution of his people... Rather Stephen is telling the Establishment that it is they not he that is in the wrong – scripturally and morally...

b) Stephen is in effect saying that the religious establishment has abandoned the faith – again! And worse it has set itself against it... You will recall the Lord Jesus's condemnation of the Pharisees and Scribes because they nullified and negated God's word by their traditions and rulings...

c) Stephen is in effect saying that they rather than he are the guilty party and they need to repent and believe. They not only caballed against and condemned Christ which led to his crucifixion but now these same religious authorities are persecuting his followers and have set themselves against the way, the truth, and the life. They have rejected the power to love in favour of the love of power... They have a zeal but not according to knowledge...

5. Stephen's apologia makes clear that the Temple and the Law were anticipatory:

a) Stephen recognises the symbolic importance of the Temple, but God was never confined to it. Hence, he appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia. He was with Joseph in Egypt and came to the relief of his people thereby. He similarly revealed himself to Moses there and on Mount Sinai where he gave his people the law. The Temple symbolised God's presence amid his people and it was a type of which Jesus Christ is the antitype and fulfilment. Christ is the true Temple of God which was destroyed and raised again in three days... In Christ, do we truly encounter God. And his church which is the body of Christ is the Temple of the Holy Spirit...

b) Stephen similarly recognised the importance of the Law. The continuance of the moral law summarised in the 10 Commandments showing how to love God and love one's neighbour that are now internalised by a new heart and a right spirit in the New Covenant. He recognised the peculiar laws that applied to Israel as a nation such as dietary and ritualistic regulations that similarly pointed to Jesus and would be superseded and superfluous now that Christ has come.

For a fuller grasp of this theme, we can read through the Epistle to the Hebrews...

c) Stephen hence seeks to demonstrate both continuity and discontinuity. And the interpretative key to scripture and its application (faith and practice) is Christ. Augustine of Hippo's famous saying is ever apposite: 'the New (Testament) was in the old concealed; the old is in the new revealed'.

Questions

- 1) Should all Christians be able to theologially and theoretically defend the Christian faith?
- 2) Who or what determines right and wrong in matters of faith and morals?
- 3) What is the church? Who belongs to the church?
- 4) How would you respond to someone that said, we no longer need the Old Testament scriptures?