

"THE MAN STEPHEN"

(Acts 8:8-15)

(Ajith Fernando)

STEPHEN MUST HAVE been an outstanding person because Luke mentions six features of his character and ministry in 6:5-10. (1) He was "*a man full of faith*" (6:5). As David Williams points out, "His faith was not different in kind from the faith that all Christians have, but exceptional in the extent to which he was willing to trust Christ, to take him at his word and to risk all for Christ's sake."¹ This was a key requirement for one who blazed new trails for the gospel. Many opposed him. Probably even people within the church would have preferred for him to take a more cautious approach. But Stephen saw certain implications in what the Bible taught and what Christ did, and he was willing to risk all for the truth of those implications.

(2) He was "*full... of the Holy Spirit*" (6:5). This statement is found in the context of a listing of the Seven. This need not have been mentioned, since all of the Seven had to be filled with the Spirit (6:3). Possibly there were some like, Stephen and Barnabas (11:24), who so exhibited the power of the Spirit that when people observed them, they were struck by this fact, and it is thus given special mention. Verse 8 confirms this by saying Stephen was "a man full of God's . . . power." This feature manifested itself as he "did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.

(3) He was "*a man full of God's grace*" (6:8). Since this phrase comes just before the external manifestation of God's power, we can assume that it refers to the way God was manifested internally. Thus, Bruce and Longenecker think that what is intended by the use of "grace" here is "spiritual charm" or "winsomeness."² This is a possible meaning of the word used here (*charis*).³ Stephen had let God's grace impact him so much that it had made him a gracious person. Of course, graciousness does not mean weakness, and later we see him thundering accusations against the Jews (7:51-53). But it does mean that Stephen was able to act in a Christlike way under provocation.

(4) The opponents who debated Stephen were "members of the Synagogue⁴ of the Freedmen" (v. 9). They came from four places: Cyrene and Alexandria, cities in upper Africa, and Cilicia and Asia, provinces in Asia Minor. The most important town in Cilicia was Tarsus, Paul's hometown. Did Paul (Saul) worship in this synagogue? We cannot be sure, but we know that he was involved in

¹David John Williams, *Acts*, p. 119.

²F.F. Bruce, *Acts: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, p. 185; Bruce Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 334.

³ Luke uses *charis* in this way in Luke 4:22 and Acts 4:33.

⁴ Some have understood this verse as referring to more than one synagogue, and the figures suggested range is from two to five synagogues. The NIV is probably correct in understanding it as one synagogue with freedmen from all four places. See Bruce, *Acts: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, p. 186-187.



Stephen's death. He may have, however, preferred a synagogue using Hebrew, for he calls himself a Hebrew (2 Cor. 11:22, Phil. 3:5). The most important town in Asia was Ephesus (cf. also the seven churches in Asia, Rev. 2-3). Freedmen (*libertinos*⁵) were probably the descendants of those who had been liberated from slavery or imprisonment. This synagogue "might well have owed its origin to Jews who had been taken as prisoners of war to Rome in the time of Pompey (63 B.C.)" and were later liberated.⁶ This was clearly a Hellenist synagogue and may be the one to which Stephen himself once belonged.⁷

(5) and (6) The last two features of Stephen's character relate to his preaching: "*They could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke*" (6;10). "Wisdom" (*sophia*) appears only four times in Acts (6:3, 10; 7:10, 22). It was an inspired wisdom" (REB), in that the Spirit gave Stephen the words to speak, in keeping with the promise of Christ, "For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict" (Luke21:15).

According to Jewish and Old Testament ideas, wisdom refers to one's "approach to life, arising out of life in the covenant bestowed by God." It was "regarded as the gift of God."⁸ Luke follows this idea in his use of the word "wisdom." We see it in Stephen's speech, which is saturated in Scripture and applies Scripture to the challenges arising from the gospel. Speaking out of the Jewish worldview, using Jewish Scripture, and inspired by the Spirit, Stephen speaks in a way that cuts to the heart of their thinking, and they cannot answer him. In the previous study we talked of the ability to apply Scripture to the challenges one faces as a key to an effective ministry of the Word. Stephen brilliantly exemplifies this ability.

⁵ A transliteration from the latin *libertinus*.

⁶ F.W. Danker, "Synagogue of the Freedmen," ISBE, 2:360.

⁷ Williams, Acts, p. 124.

⁸ J. Goetzmann, "Wisdom," NIDNTT, 3:1030.