

## "CHRISTIAN RADICALISM"

(Acts 7:1-53)

(John Stott)

What interests many people most about Stephen is that he was the first Christian martyr. Luke's main concern lies elsewhere, however. He emphasizes the vital role Stephen played in the development of the world-wide Christian mission through both his teaching and his death.

Stephen's teaching, misunderstood as 'blasphemy' against the temple and the law, was that Jesus (as he himself had claimed) was the fulfillment of both. Already in the Old Testament God was tied to his people, wherever they were, not to buildings. So now Jesus is ready to accompany his people wherever they go. When soon Paul and Barnabas set out into the unknown on the first missionary journey, they will find (as Abraham, Joseph and Moses had found before them) that God is with them. That is exactly what they reported on their return (14:27; 15:12). Indeed, this assurance is indispensable to mission. Change is painful to us all, especially when it affects our cherished buildings and customs, and we should not seek change merely for the sake of change. Yet true *Christian radicalism* is open to change. It knows that God has bound himself to his church (promising that he will never leave it) and to his word (promising that it will never pass away). But God's church means people not buildings, and God's word means Scripture not traditions. So long as these essentials are preserved, the buildings and the traditions can if necessary go. We must not allow them to imprison the living God or to impede his mission in the world.

Stephen's martyrdom supplemented the influence of his teaching. Not only did it deeply impress Saul of Tarsus, and contribute to his conversion which led to his becoming the apostle to the Gentiles, but it also occasioned 'a great persecution' which led to the scattering of the disciples 'throughout Judea and Samaria' (8:1b).

The church was shocked, even stunned, by the martyrdom of Stephen and by the violent opposition which followed. But, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see how God's providence used Stephen's testimony, in word and deed, through life and death, to promote the church's mission.

