

## "THE BIRTH OF TWO COMMUNITIES"

(Acts 7:1-53)

(Darrell Bock)

In sum, Stephen defends himself against the charge of being unfaithful to the law and the temple by engaging in a wide-ranging examination of the Jewish Scripture. He is, as he makes his case, a "winsome radical," able to think differently from those around him but engaged as he does so (Fernando 1998: 251-53). Here his citations and allusions to these sacred texts show that (1) the nation looked to the promise of a coming one, (2) it often resisted God's will, (3) it rejected the leaders whom God had chosen, and (4) the temple was never designed to be the single place where God could be found. Deep knowledge of Scripture allows one to have a worldview that differentiates what is in the world from what a child of God should think, be, and do. What Stephen says here, their own Scripture regularly had taught and warned them about much earlier. It is a particularly powerful moment when Scripture is applied in such a way that it exposes what is really going on. Stephen did this in his speech. Such confrontation made his audience quite uncomfortable, even though it was spoken and intended for their benefit. God is far greater than any one building or location. He is the God of the world and should be seen as present throughout it. Stephen's most basic point is that the Creator is the ruler of all creation and is present in all of it. This is the final point Stephen makes as he turns to exhort them to be responsive to God. The speech ends with the question of how they will respond to a history lesson given from their own sacred tradition. In effect, Stephen asks, "Do appreciate own history enough not to repeat its mistakes?"

The pericope explains how Judaism and Christianity began to grow apart. The new faith emphasized a view of the law as promise, a view that pointed to one to come, that is, to Jesus. Here was a view that relativized the importance of the temple but along lines already set forth in divine disclosures. God was not limited to one locale. Here was a Jew who saw in Israel's past a great deal of unfaithfulness, which served as a basis for suggesting the need for renewal. The new faith was actually being more faithful to the promise and law than the older faith was! Stephen's audience did not want to hear any of this. They reacted, in all likelihood, before Stephen had any chance to move to a direct discussion of the one to whom this all pointed, Jesus. The martyrdom that emerged out of Stephen's speech was an indicator that the future held a parting of the ways for these two groups. But it was not Jesus's disciples who sought the division. The reaction of most in the nation to the message brought about the separation. The gospel was for all, especially those in Israel, but the rejection by those in the nation made it necessary for the new community to go its own way.

