

**TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
IHOP BIBLE STUDY**

6 Topic: "Stephen's Episode and Stephen's Speech" -- with commentary

Acts 6: 8 - 15, "Stephen Seized;" Acts 7: 1 – 53, "Stephen's Speech at the Sanhedrin;" Acts 7: 54 - 60, "The Stoning of Stephen."

The purpose of the Book of Acts is to record the activity of the Holy Spirit in the Vision and Ministry of Peter and Paul. **Today's study is the 6th of 20 lessons.**

A contextual statement:

Interestingly, *The Interpreter's Bible* makes the following observation. In the book of Acts, "The Lord is not returned, but in the meantime the word of God is being carried on by the church. The Gentile mission is itself the eschatological action of God." (*The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1971. p. 730.)

This I want to affirm as our perspective. **We will study this book from the perspective of the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit.** This puts us out on the cusp of a deep and foreboding spiritual hole that is eternally deep. The Holy Spirit is that intuited presence within us that urges us to "Jump." "Jump!" To take this leap of faith means to surrender ourselves to the eternal deeps. The discovery, to which I can personally testify, is that this deep, dark, mysterious hole is the place where God lives within us. As we lose control of everything— our-selves, our relationships to neighbor and to God— then we can discover that God really does sustain us. But the experience is like falling, and it is not entirely comfortable. But it works.

Read the assigned scripture.

I. Acts 6: 8 - 15, "Stephen Seized"

A. Vs. 8a: If I was walking down the street and saw Stephen, "a man full of God's grace and power," what would I be seeing?

WS: The IHOP Bible Study meeting always meets this kind of question by describing actions such a person might be doing, such as helping others. Of course, this is a good way to make such judgments. This is true, as long as it is understood that The Church is what you see it does. However, this means that when Muslims, or agnostics do good things, then at this moment they are representatives of The Church (by definition.)

My personal story concerns an individual who, in college, came to school the first day with the most beautiful expression in her/his eyes. Later, in the second years, this individual experiences some things during which we lost this special gleam. It is only after some 30 years is this gleam coming back into his/her eyes. The point is that in the early church Christians were known as those with Christian eyes. This individual had it, lost it, and is now getting it back.

B. Vs. 8b: Do some research in your commentary on the Synagogue of the Freedmen. Who did this synagogue represent?

WS: The traditional understanding of the Synagogue of the Freedmen is that the were freed Jewish slaves from

Cyrene and Alexandria, Cilicia, Cyrene, and Asia. There is some suggestion that Luke indicates all of these freedmen attended one synagogue, yet comprising these representative places. (My own summary of several commentary references.)

C. Vs. 15b: If I was walking down the street and saw a man the “face of an angel,” what would I be seeing?

WS: The answer is similar to that posed in I-A above. There can be an indefinable aura about some people. I was reminded about Roy Burkhart, a Christian mystic and founder of the Community Church in Columbus, Ohio. He was a deep man of prayer and carried with him a certain mystical presence that was discernable by most people.

II. Acts 7: 1 – 53, “Stephen’s Speech at the Sanhedrin” (The History Lesson)

A. First, speculate on why Stephen answer’s his accusers with his history lesson.

WS: “The success that attended his labors and the power with which he preached the gospel stirred the antagonism of certain men 'who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia' (v 9, RSV). These men were apparently devout Jews of the Dispersion, who had come from the various countries mentioned to worship at Jerusalem. Concluding from Stephen's preaching that he was propagating ideas calculated to lessen the importance of the Temple and the customs of Moses (vs. 12, 14), they sought first to weaken his influence and nullify his preaching by disputing with him. . . . Having failed in this strategy, they instigated certain ones to accuse him of blasphemy (v 11). This aroused the indignation of the people and rulers; he was arrested and arraigned before the council (v. 12). . . In defiance, Stephen presented a resume of the history of God's chosen people beginning with Abraham (ch 7:2), and endeavoured to show that the Hebrews had consistently rejected God's leadership and had now rejected His Messiah. (www.nisbett.com/people/bp-stephen.htm)

While the above is the more traditional explanation of Stephen's message and the motivation for his stoning - and this would be enough reason, to be sure --I believe there is a deeper accusation supported in Chapter 7: 42 and 43. My analysis is based on Stephen's use of Amos 5: 25-27 and particularly in vs. 43: "You have lifted up the shrine of Molech." Then, again, in 7:49 and 50, in Stephens' use of Isaiah 66: 1, 2, when Isaiah speaks for God is the question, "Heaven is my throne and the earth my footstool." The implication is that the Temple is too small of a place. The consequence of these statements is that Stephen does more than just question the importance of the Temple, he is saying your House is too small for God, and then associates the Temple as a place of Molech - a place for the sacrifice of Children by immolation (fire).

B. Vs. 7:43: This is a quotation of Amos 5: 25 – 27. Note in vs. 43 the mention of “Molech.” Go on the web and search to find information about the god

Molech. Speculate on the presence of Molech today.

WS: As you research this topic, remember the Molech represents child sacrifice. Begin to associate this activity with the various ways in which we sacrifice children today. These come to my mind: the war in Iraq, abortion and not adoption, etc. One early report of Molech can be found in Leviticus 18:21ff.

C. In this history lesson, where do you see the Holy Spirit at work?

WS: The Holy Spirit always is an alarm clock. When it rings, we never know from whom the clock rings, except it rings for each of us. Stephen's accusations are an alarm ringing in the heads of the Jews. Their response is denial that the clock is ringing for them. The response is then to kill the messenger instead of accepting the message.

D. Vss. 6: 13 – 14: Go back into these previous verses to read of the charges brought against Stephen.

WS: The progression of events: they seized him, produced false witnesses, Stephen preached against the temple and the customs of Moses.

E. Answer the question raised in vs. 7:1, "Are these charges true?"

WS: The consensus of the IHOP Bible Study is that the charges are true, at least from the perspective of the Freedmen

III. Acts 7: 54 - 60, "The Stoning of Stephen."

A. Vs. 55: What does it mean that Stephen was "full of the Holy Spirit. . .?"

WS: The Holy Spirit is a spiritual alarm clock whose ring we must choose to answer or not. Stephen, like all of us, made his decision in absolute freedom of choice. His choice to be a follower of Jesus Christ eventually fulfilled his vision for the meaning of his life. The vision is symbolized in vss. 55 and 56.

To add my own note, the purpose of all humans is to make God happy. This is learned in most catechisms, in particular in Luther's Smaller Catechism. It is when we live to make God happy that we fulfill what it means to be fully human and humane. When we make decisions that are the antithesis of our human purpose that we experience loneliness, emptiness, unhappiness, etc.

The reward for Stephen's faithfulness may not be readily seen or understood. However, I like to think that Stephen's actions have inspired us all for 2 millennium, while his accusers and murder's are left as unknowns, and certainly not humane.

B. Vs. 56: Using Gut Trip Analysis, explain what Stephen saw.

WS: Stephen saw the fulfillment of living in Perfect At-One-Ment with neighbor, self and God. In this way, he would fulfill the Great Commandment of Jesus Christ, and fulfill the meaning of being both fully human and fully humane.

Alright folks, talk to me.