

WHAT WE MUST DO (1)
UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES 9



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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

What We Must Do (1)
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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Contents

Welcome to <i>What We Must Do (1)</i>	4
1 When They Can Stand It No More	5
2 Guilty, as Charged	7
3 In Their Face	9
4 Common Ground	11
5 Their Own Story against Them	13
6 The Face of an Angel	15
7 Then and There, Here and Now	17
Questions for Reflection or Discussion	19

Welcome to *What We Must Do (1)*

This is the first of a two-part study considering what we must do to fulfill our callings as witnesses to Christ in our secular and narcissistic age.

We cannot simply stand by while the tares of this world propagate and pollute throughout the Lord's field. We must continue to engage the Lord in His work of sowing good Kingdom seed into the world, beginning in our own Personal Mission Fields.

But we must be firm in our conviction and skilled in our ability to communicate the truth that is in Jesus. As we live for Him, doing those good works which help to restrain the evil of our day, we will have many opportunities to give a reason for the hope that is within us. Stephen can show us how to be ready, how to proceed, and what to expect as we do.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 When They Can Stand It No More

And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Acts 6.10

The message, not the man

We need to understand the times in which we live, so that, like Paul, we can communicate the Good News effectively, and so that, as Jesus taught, we may sow good Kingdom seed throughout the world.

Understanding the times is essential for knowing what we must do to fulfill our calling as witness to Christ and citizens and ambassadors of God's Kingdom (1 Chron. 12.32; Acts 1.8; 1 Thess. 2.12). Many people in our secular age are losing patience with the Church, and with those who profess faith in Christ. In the view of many Christians, the world is becoming a hostile place for those who believe. And if this is the case, it behooves us to search the Scriptures, so that we might learn from them what we must do to fulfill our calling in this age in flight from God. Stephen provides an excellent focal point for such a consideration.

Stephen had a good reputation among the people of Jerusalem. He seems to have been a deeply spiritual man, full of practical wisdom, and ready to help others wherever he was needed (Acts 6.3). He is described as having been filled with the Holy Spirit.

Full of grace and power, Stephen was also outspoken about his faith – not in a brash and blaring way, but calmly, speaking with wisdom and sound reason to everyone who would listen.

In spite of his gentle and reasonable manner, however, some of his contemporaries chose to dispute with him – members of a local synagogue, and clubs of foreigners who were staying together in Jerusalem (Acts 6.9). They could find no fault with the man: he was as good, wise, and kind a person as any of them had known. But they found his message offensive, probably because he insisted that a relationship with God depends not on one's heritage, associations, attainments, or efforts, but on repenting from all sin and believing in Jesus Christ for forgiveness and salvation.

Such a message implied that their views were wrong and their morality was not what it should be. They chafed at the thought that *he* – a lowly synagogue servant – should presume to tell *them* what they ought to believe and how they ought to live.

What to do?

Nevertheless, our text tells us that these opponents could not withstand the wisdom Stephen demonstrated or the grace and power of the Spirit working through him. He effectively rebuffed their objections and set their views aside. They were left with nothing else to say against him.

What should they do? How would they protect their cherished beliefs and practices and save face among their peers?

Our passage continues, “And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon *him*, seized him, and brought *him* to the council” (Acts 6.12). And just to make sure he wouldn't frustrate them there, “They also set up false witnesses who said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us”” (Acts 6.13, 14).

That line had worked once before to secure an unjust conviction of an inconvenient Evangelist; perhaps it would work again.

Just what you'd expect

I have a friend who helps local believers in Muslim and other nations to proclaim the Gospel, begin house churches, and train the pastors those churches require. God has laid His hand on this ministry in a special way. Scores of thousands are coming to faith in Jesus Christ, and thousands of house churches are cropping up, right in the thick of Muslim traditions, culture, and followers.

As we might expect, my friend receives reports that it is not uncommon for believers to be martyred for their faith.

Which is only what we should expect in an environment committed to a secular, material, and narcissistic worldview, and hostile to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When people can no longer stand to hear the Gospel's challenges to their settled way of life, and they no longer have anything reasonable to say in defense of their worldview, they may express their hostility in more overt ways.

It happened to Jesus and to Stephen, and if today it is happening in various parts of the world beyond our American shores, we must not be naïve to think that it cannot happen here as well. A strong undercurrent of deep antipathy toward the Gospel runs through our culture and society, and we see its ugly, angry face flaring in threats and vitriol from time to time.

Do we understand the possibility of such a threat becoming more overt in our times? Do we know what we must do? Are we ready, like Stephen, to face this threat, confront this challenge, and stand firm in the face of whatever consequences may ensue?

If we as Christians have not yet addressed this question, and if we're not prepared to take our stand before a hostile age, then it's time – nearly *past* time – that we do so.

For reflection

1. What indications do you see in our day of real anger, perhaps even hostility, against the Christian faith? What's the source of this?
2. Do you think most of the Christian you know are prepared to deal with this anger? Why or why not?
3. Summarize the Gospel as you understand it, and as you might share it with a friend or colleague:

Next steps – Preparation: Meditate on Acts 17.32-34. Here are three responses you can expect whenever you share the Gospel with someone. Talk with some Christian friends about this passage. Outline your approach to each of these different responses. What would you do?

2 Guilty, as Charged

They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law..." Acts 6.13

A studied indifference

Some years ago Susie and I were having dinner with two other pastors and their wives, when the conversation turned to persecution and martyrdom.

I have for many years had a keen interest in the plight of the persecuted Church. Back in the early 80s I did a good bit of reading about the subject, because Malcolm Muggeridge had said that the survival and growth of the persecuted church within the Soviet empire was the single most remarkable fact of 20th century history. With that in mind, I contacted every evangelical seminary I knew of to find out if they had any reading lists or course materials on the persecuted church. None did. I wrote to every evangelical publishing house, seeking titles about Christians who were being persecuted for their faith. None had any to offer – none, that is, other than the few I already possessed. I contacted every evangelical publisher of Sunday school material, looking for resources on the persecuted church. Nothing.

Here was arguably the most important fact of 20th century history, and the Church in this country was practicing a studied indifference to it. The boot heel of Marxism was suppressing and crushing the faith of Christ in many places, and the religion of Islam was just as actively and violently opposing the spread of the Gospel in traditional Muslim lands. Believers in Jesus Christ were laying down their lives before a hostile age, precisely as generations of believers had done throughout the history of the Christian movement.

Meanwhile, in this country, we were training a new generation of pastors, Sunday school students, and readers who scarcely entertained a thought about the suffering Church. We were practicing a studied indifference to our persecuted brethren in the Lord, and postponing our own consideration of what it means to suffer and die for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and why that might be necessary for believers in a secular, narcissistic age such as ours.

Like shepherds, like sheep

So I wasn't really surprised, when our dinner conversation turned to persecution and martyrdom, that one of the pastors opined that he wasn't sure he was ready for that.

Asked to explain, he said, "Well, I'm just not sure that I'm willing to lay down my life for my faith. I haven't considered that possibility just yet."

I wasn't shocked, but I was sorely dismayed. If pastors aren't thinking about this, and aren't living the Gospel as though it were more valuable than their own lives, how can they expect their people to do so? Today many pastors and church leaders, sensing the threat of persecution, are eager to have the political powers-that-be rescue them. And the people they serve are following in tow, seeking and supporting politicians who promise to protect their religious freedoms.

How unlike those believers in Marxist and Islamist lands, and how unlike Stephen.

Outraged

Stephen was charged with violating God's holy standards and place. That was the ground on which he made his defense in Acts 7. The conclusion of his address was to declare, in effect, "Guilty, as charged!"

What We Must Do (1)

Except that it wasn't Stephen who was guilty, but those who were accusing him with anger and deceit. They had violated God's Law; they had broken His covenant; they had hardened their hearts, betrayed their true traditions, and resisted His Spirit; they had killed the Righteous One.

Their response was predictable. They were completely caught off guard and outraged by being put on trial themselves, and they dragged Stephen out to the edge of the city and stoned him to death. They didn't even trouble with the niceties of gaining Roman approval.

Our secular, unbelieving age charges the Gospel with falsehood, oppression, limiting moral freedom, meddling where it doesn't belong, and much, much more.

In fact, it is our secular age that is the wellspring of lies, which oppresses our generation with half-truths and outright lies, which destroys morality in the name of license, and which, through its meddlesome government and schools, demands to control and rule every area of life.

It is not we who are guilty of screwing up the world, but all who are the enemies of Christ.

But if you choose to stand up to this, expose the lies and half-truths of our unbelieving age, and stand firmly on your true Christian convictions; if you choose to drag out the failings, vanities, and folly of this under-the-sun generation, then you must be prepared for the scorn, vitriol, and worse that might ensue, and not try to hide behind the skirts of fickle politicians or changeable laws.

What we must do is make up our minds to confront our secular age with the unyielding truth of the Gospel, for all of life and culture, and let the chips fall where they may. For even those chips fall where our sovereign God determines.

For reflection

1. What are some of the accusations the enemies of the Gospel make against Christians and Christianity today? Is there any substance to these?
2. How have Christians tried to respond to these accusations? What's been the result?
3. Would you say that most Christians you know are ready to die for their faith? Why or why not?

Next steps – Conversation: What evidence do you see that our society is becoming impatient with Christians who are too outspoken about their faith? Talk with some Christian friends about this. What is your church doing to prepare its members to stand like Stephen before our secular, unbelieving age?

3 In Their Face

*“However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says:
‘Heaven is My throne,
And earth is My footstool.
What house will you build for Me? says the LORD,
Or what is the place of My rest?
Has My hand not made all these things?’”* Acts 7:48, 49

Eager to prove

Stephen’s testimony before the Jewish court had the effect of making angry men even angrier. Angry enough to take drastic measures to silence him. One of those angry young men present at the trial and murder of Stephen was a young zealot from Tarsus, an up-and-comer in Jewish religious and intellectual ranks.

His name was Saul.

When we first meet him, holding the coats of Stephen’s murderers, he seems to be still an apprentice – not ready to get his hands dirty, but available to assist those who were. He was of the same mind as those who tore at Stephen. He was just as hostile to the Gospel as they (Acts 8.1), and he was eager to prove his commitment to root out the Christian menace.

Be assured, such angry, ready-to-strike people exist in our secular age, eager to prove their *bona fides* as advocates of the secular status quo. But be assured also, they are part of God’s greater plan and economy for bringing forth Kingdom fruit in the field of the world.

The true house of God

We recall that Stephen was charged with sinning against the temple of the Lord, by insisting that God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of His Spirit, was now building a new temple, the Church. Stephen’s defense against his prosecutors focused on that charge; he was determined to demonstrate that the charge was baseless and, even more, that his accusers were completely mistaken concerning God’s intentions with respect to His dwelling among men, and that they were to ones guilty of blaspheming against the Lord.

Having laid a foundation for his main point, by agreeing with the idea that God is determined to dwell among men, Stephen pointed first to the tabernacle in the wilderness (Acts 7.44-46). Undoubtedly those generations served by the tabernacle were of the mindset that this tent, constructed according to God’s own design, was to be His permanent dwelling-place among His people.

But, Stephen continued, we know that was not the case. For Solomon built a house for God (v. 47), which had subsequently been destroyed and replaced by the present house, against which Stephen was accused of making threats. Stephen is building the case that we should not be surprised if God chooses to make a new dwelling among His people, especially if He says so in His Word. And we certainly should not resist Him as He does.

Because, Stephen continued, God Himself had made it known through the prophet Isaiah that this earthly temple was not to be His true or final dwelling. “What house will you build for Me? says the LORD, or what is the place of My rest? Has not My hand made all these things?” (vv. 49, 50; cf. Is. 66:1, 2). Stephen’s point was a subtle one: Had his accusers not understood their own prophet? Had they failed to look beyond the

existing temple to a greater and more permanent dwelling-place for God? Had they, in fact, made an idol of the temple, just, as he explained earlier, the people had made an idol in the wilderness (vv. 38-42)?

Blind to the truth

And just so they didn't miss the point, Stephen put the cards face-up on the table: "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers *did*, so *do you*" (v. 51). It's as if Stephen had said, "You self-deceived, power-hungry fools, who think you can control God and His people by making the temple and your traditions your own special order of operations! You read your traditions selectively, or not at all, so it's no wonder you're so blind to the truth about God."

You don't get much more in-your-face than that. But the Jews had heard enough, and their fury could not be contained. Nothing would keep them from silencing such impertinence.

Except one thing: Stephen's example of boldness and suffering made a permanent impact on Saul of Tarsus.

It is very interesting to note, in Paul's sermon on Mars Hill, that he took off on the Greek philosophers from the same place Stephen had taken off on him and his cronies, so many years earlier (Acts 17.24). Evidently, Stephen's bold and daring witness made a lasting impression. Was his suffering and death worth it? Paul never got over the shame and sorrow he felt over his role in Stephen's murder, as we see in Acts 22.20.

Stephen's confrontational manner before those who presumed to try him may have infuriated them all, including Saul, to the point of murder. But he was welcomed into glory by the Savior, standing to receive His faithful witness. And the long-term value of his sacrifice cannot be measured, given the role the apostle Paul fulfilled in the wide-spread establishment of the Christian faith throughout the world of his day.

Is God preparing you for such a role? Does He intend to use your boldness to shake-up the smug, rattle the railers, and prepare the proud for the work of Christ in their lives? You can't know, but you must be ready. A hostile age, after all, can only destroy our bodies. But who knows what power may be unleashed by our in-your-face witness and willingness to suffer for the Lord?

For reflection

1. Do you think it's every appropriate for Christians to "get in the face" of those who oppose the Gospel? Explain:
2. How should we try to balance the command to be respectful and gentle (1 Pet. 3.15) with the need to confront and challenge those who oppose the Gospel?
3. What might we expect as outcomes when we get in the faces of those who oppose Christianity?

Next steps – Conversation: Meet with some of your Christian friends to discuss the following questions: What is it about our faith in Jesus Christ that makes unbelieving people not like us? Can we do anything to avoid making them angry? How can believers help one another to stand strong for Christ in a hostile age?

4 Common Ground

And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran..." Acts 7.2

Find a patch of ground

Stephen's witness had a profound and lasting effect on Paul. As Paul emphasized the greatness of God, Who does not live in temples made by human hands, he must have thought back to Stephen's witness before the Jewish authorities, and of his own role in that tragic situation.

It's possible that Stephen affected Paul's witness to the Greeks in another way as well. We recall Paul's opening remarks to that gathering of philosophers and thinkers, how he complimented them for their interest in matters religious, and that he used their own writers as a platform for sharing the Word of Christ. Stephen did the same in his witness before the Jewish leaders; thus, he shows us that we must establish common ground with those to whom the Lord is sending us with the good seed of His Kingdom.

It can be difficult at times to remember that people who are outspoken in their opposition to God and the Gospel, who have nothing kind to say about anything Christian, and who seem so angry whenever anything related to religion comes up – these people actually have a good deal in common with those of us who believe.

That might surprise some of us. After all, what can we have in common with people who seem to hate us so much that, given half an opportunity, they would figure out some way to silence us once and for all?

But Stephen understood this, and he knew that it was important to stand for Christ on whatever patch of common ground he might share with his accusers. We must understand the people and times to which the Lord has sent us, and we must make every effort to communicate the Good News with them. This will require that we seek common ground with those among whom we sow the good seed of the Kingdom.

Seek common ground

Notice how Stephen began his defense: He referred to those who would murder him before the end of the day as *brothers and fathers*. He spoke about their common ancestry in Abraham, even when Abraham was still living as a pagan in Mesopotamia. And he went to considerable lengths to identify with them in their national story: the promises to Abraham, the patriarchs, captivity in Egypt, deliverance through Moses, the giving of the Law, and so forth.

Stephen understood the importance of seeking a *positive connection* with people, even though he knew they weren't interested in connecting with him, and that, no matter what he said or did, this situation was not going to turn out well.

Nevertheless, he made the effort. He affirmed their story and his own connection to it, if, by any means, he might assuage their anger, connect with them by his message, and create a context in which reason and cooler heads could prevail.

Image-bearers

Because all people are made in the image of God, we can always find something about them which can serve as a kind of common ground for talking about the things of the Lord. Whether it's their work, interests and avocations, views on this or that, background and upbringing, or their sense of purpose and morality, we can always discover something about them, the fruit of their being God's image-bearers, which we can affirm, and

on the basis of which we can establish a connection and begin a conversation about the Lord.

Regardless of the degree of hostility this world may display toward us and the Gospel, we must always do our best to remain respectful (1 Pet. 3.15), to speak gently and reasonably (Col. 4.6), and to engage those who oppose us by establishing some common ground on *their* turf. We must help them understand God's calling and message within the framework of *their story, their worldview, and their concerns*. Some people, we know, will respond favorably to such efforts, and civil and ongoing conversation may be the result.

Others will see in our effort a condescending and judgmental attitude, which, combined with what they already regard as naiveté, if not lunacy, will only serve to make them angrier and more determined to put us in our place.

There have been times in history when whole societies were like this, and sincere believers, no matter how gracious and reasonable, encountered the same response Stephen did, if not always quite so violent and final. We could be heading that way in our day.

But we must not put our hopes in political solutions or relief as threats of persecution foment. Nor must we abandon the effort to connect with those we are trying to reach for Christ, even though we may suspect that nothing we do or say is going to change their minds or mitigate their wrath.

We have to proceed anyway, even if the consequences should be dire, for there are always young zealots hanging around in the background, watching as older heads hammer us and our worldview. And some of these may already be starting to wonder whether our blustering and bullying, under-the-sun generation may have gotten the story wrong.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by trying to find “common ground” with the enemies of the Gospel? Can you give some examples of what might serve as common ground with people in your Personal Mission Field?
2. Why should we expect to be able to discover such common ground?
3. Why is it important to do this? Does doing this mean we will always succeed in helping others to understand or believe the Gospel? Explain:

Next steps – Conversation: Make a list of the non-Christians you regularly see during a typical week. Beside each name, write down two or three things you think you might have in common with them (review the things mentioned in this article). During the week to come, use one or more of those “common ground” components to start a conversation with a non-Christian – a friendly conversation only. Can you see how such conversations could easily lead to something more substantial?

5 Their Own Story against Them

“This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.’ This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected...” Acts 7.37-39

Their resources for our case

Stephen shows us why it is so important to understand the times and the people to whom God sends us as His witness. As Paul, knowing Greek culture and thinking, couched the Gospel message in terms familiar to his hearers (Acts 17), and Stephen connected with his audience along the lines of their worldview, we too must be able to put ourselves into the story of the people around us, so that we can help them see through their under-the-sun worldview to the brighter hopes of our under-the-heavens calling from God.

This is what we’re trying to do by seeking common ground with those to whom we bear witness. One of the advantages of doing this is that the resources of *their* story become available to us for *our* message.

Remember, all who reject the Gospel are separated from God, cut off from truth, and are therefore living a lie. Paul makes this assertion plainly enough in Romans 1.18-32. But because all people are made in the image of God, they are at all times susceptible to His breaking into their purview and upsetting their settled convictions and beliefs. And very often, God will use people like you and me to accomplish that unsettling.

So however people might construe their particular story, we know that, at best, this story only *seems* to make sense to them (Prov. 14.12). And it only *seems* to make sense because they have managed to overlook, omit, or wrongly interpret some aspects of their own story. If we know their story well, and if we take our stance for Christ from within their own worldview, we may be able to use their story to help them see the folly of their under-the-sun thinking, and thus open a fissure in their soul for the light of truth.

Where they’ve missed the boat

As angry as folks may be at us already, at the risk of angering them even more, we need to be ready to explain the hope that is within us by showing them, from their own story line, where they’ve missed the boat, become inconsistent, are omitting key facts, or have simply gone wrong.

We must not be reluctant to say to people, as Jesus often said to those who attacked Him, “Here is where you’ve obviously got it wrong.”

This is what Stephen did before the highest religious leaders in Israel. Remember Moses? he asked his accusers. Well, of course they did. They were the spiritual and religious heirs of Moses! They were the keepers of the Law! The preservers of the traditions! The rulers of the temple and of the people! Of course, they knew Moses.

But what Stephen wanted them to see was, that like that generation in the wilderness, who perished under the wrath of God, they had set Moses aside and were pursuing a path more agreeable to their own selfish interests.

Moses taught the people to look forward to a coming Prophet and Deliverer, Who would bring God’s Word to His people with finality. He would fulfill all the Law, be the final perfect sacrifice, and bring renewal of heart to all who looked to Him, like Israel looked upon the serpent in the wilderness, for deliverance from their sins.

But Stephen's accusers had thrust Moses aside at precisely this point, just as their unbelieving forebears had, and they were determined to preserve their own project, and their place in it, even while they tried to claim Moses as their spiritual forebear.

They got it

Stephen's message to them was subtle, but they got it. Oh yeah, they got it. He said to them, You're like Dathan and those rebels in the wilderness, who wanted power and privilege and self-interest rather than obedience, and you can be sure that you will perish just like they did if you persevere in this foolish course.

The worldviews of those who oppose the Gospel, especially those who, in this secular age, speak out so boldly and brashly against Christianity and those who profess it, are shot through with damning inconsistencies, falsehoods, incongruities, half-truths, and lies. We need to understand where these occur in their thinking, why they matter so much, and how to point them out in our conversations. And we need to be bold, while at the same time remaining gracious, in showing our unbelieving friends that, contrary to what seems right to them, their under-the-sun worldview is rife with vanity and feeding on the wind.

They may not appreciate it when we point this out and show them where they've got it wrong, and our doing so may only make them angrier; but is it loving, and is it loyal to truth, to let them continue in their bluster and blindness, without an honest attempt to show them the error of their ways? Knowing what we do about the lie of our secular and narcissistic age, as well as of the coming harvest of the Lord, we must use all the resources at our disposal – both from our worldview and theirs – to help our neighbors see the truth that is in Jesus.

For reflection

1. People don't like to be told that they're wrong. Why is that?
2. But why is it important that we do this? Can we hope to help someone see the truth of the Gospel so long as he continues to cling to a way of life that *seems* right to him?
3. When it's necessary to say to someone, "Well, here's where you're wrong," how can we do this without sounding like what we're saying is, "Listen, stupid, and you might learn something"?

Next steps – Preparation: It's important to help people talk about what they believe, so that, as we listen, we can spot any inconsistencies and ask for clarification. What are some good questions to use in teasing out the worldview of an unbelieving friend or co-worker? Talk with some other believers about this question.

6 The Face of an Angel

And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel. Acts 6.15

Lies and more lies

Stephen was a good man, a true servant of people in need. He was well thought-of throughout the city of Jerusalem, and showed real skill in managing resources to help others. Stephen was just the kind of person you'd like to have more of in the population of your town.

Well, except for his exasperating and unbending ideas about religion.

Those who dragged Stephen before the religious rulers of Jerusalem knew they could never make a case against him on the basis of his character. So they lied about him, putting him in the worst possible light as the kind of person who threatens the stability of the status quo and the privileges of the powerful.

They were right about that, of course, but not for the false reasons they proposed. Stephen was hated because he threatened the secure status of certain local tares. He lived his witness for the Kingdom of God, and sowed the good seed of the Kingdom liberally and effectively to all around. And it was just for this reason that the enemies of God made themselves enemies of Stephen as well.

We must prepare for such a possibility in our own witness for the Lord.

Clear, concise, reasonable

Throughout his defense, Stephen was concise, clear, and reasonable. There are no religious buzz words in his speech, no mindless rants against some straw man, no *ad hominem* finger-pointing or name-calling, and no alarmist cries of danger on every hand. He clearly sensed that the deck was stacked against him, though, so, from the beginning of his defense, we can see him moving toward a hard confrontation with those who were demanding to know whether the charges against him were true.

If we follow his argument carefully, we will not be surprised when he suddenly breaks out with accusations against and condemnation of his accusers, which were sure to end him in even hotter water. The temperature has been rising, mainly through suggestion and intimation, so that Stephen's outburst in verses 51-53 does not, if we've been paying attention, surprise us: "*You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.*"

I sometimes get the impression that Bible students look at Stephen as very gentle and peaceable in his demeanor, his hands neatly folded and eyes drifting heavenward, as he meekly tries to explain himself. As much as I love Rembrandt's painting of the stoning of Stephen, we pick up some of that same notion in the placid and resigned demeanor in which he portrays the first Christian martyr.

The face of an angel?

But is this what is meant by Stephen's face looking like that of an angel? This is way many of us think about angels, like those goofy baroque and rococo *putti* floating around through paintings of Biblical narratives and themes.

But this is not the way the faces of angels struck those in Scripture who observed them. In Scripture, when people came face to face with angels, they were terrified. They fell down on their faces and feared to look up.

What We Must Do (1)

Whatever it was about Stephen's angelic countenance that pierced the hearts of those who observed it, the response was never anything like, "Aw, isn't that sweet?"

I think Stephen must have looked pretty bold, perhaps even fierce, as he began his defense. His words must have been forceful, indicting, and gilded with glory as he spoke.

When, at the end of his speech, he condemned his accusers as those "who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it," he might just as well have been speaking about himself – the messenger or "angel" (the Greek word is the same) they were about to stone to death.

Certainly, the Apostle Paul never forgot this experience, could never shake the face of that martyr or the thunder of his witness, and I can't help but think that many of Stephen's murderers, recalling his testimony and courage, must have experienced no small amount of shame and remorse for the rest of their lives.

How about us? When we start talking about the things of the Lord, are we all, "You see, uh, well you know, this is just what I think, this is what it means to me, or well, I could be wrong"? Or do we stand like Stephen against the Gospel's detractors, radiant and bold and, yes, even a bit fearsome, as we open our mouths to defend the faith of Christ against the foolishness of unbelief?

Which face of the angel do others see in us as we begin talking about our Lord Who saved us?

For reflection

1. Think of some situations in Scripture when people saw the face of an angel. What did they see? What did John see in Revelation 1? How did they respond? Or Daniel? Or Zacharias?
2. Should we think that Luke intended a connection between Acts 6.15 and Acts 7.53? Explain:
3. Why are so many Christians reticent and ineffective when it comes to sharing their faith? Why do we lack the boldness and conviction of Stephen?

Next steps – Conversation: How would you assess your own boldness in proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God? Talk with some fellow believers. How can you encourage and assist one another in being bolder and more consistent in presenting the Gospel, even to those who are obviously hostile against it?

7 Then and There, Here and Now

But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" Acts 7.55, 56

Stephen's vision

Stephen shows us how, understanding the times in which we live, we must live and proclaim our witness for Christ humbly, but with conviction, even though doing so might find us tangled in the tares of this world, and getting the worst of it.

Stephen's outburst against his accusers probably sealed his fate (vv. 51-53). But what he said after that fed the irrational rage of the religious leaders so that they moved as one to murder him, even without seeking approval of the Roman authorities. Who was this upstart nobody to claim that he had visions of the heavenly realm which not even the highest religious authorities in Israel had ever enjoyed!

I think sometimes we miss the significance of Stephen's heavenly vision. Many of us probably find it extraordinary that he was somehow enabled to see through the veil that separates time from eternity, to be granted a glimpse of the glorious throne room of the resurrected and living Christ.

After all, how many of us have ever seen that?

Even though, as Paul explains, we have been seated there with Christ (Eph. 2.6), and even though he commands us to focus our thoughts on that heavenly scene (Col. 3.1-3), where we may expect to see the glory of God in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4.6). And even though many other places in Scripture urge us to look into the throne room of the Lord and gaze on His beauty and glory. Still, I suspect that most Christians have never really seen with the eye of faith what Scripture plainly tells us is true and all around us, all the time (Eph. 1.15-23). We have not managed to allow the then and there of the heavenly realm to have any vital role in our here and now lives.

So when we see Stephen reporting on this glimpse into the heavenly realm, we think this must be some highly unusual experience reserved only for, you know, real saints.

Like Stephen.

Faith beyond the mundane world

But I believe that Stephen's surprise upon seeing the Lord was not the fact that he actually saw him in glory. I think Stephen had the kind of faith that lived beyond this mundane world, past the daily grind without passing it by, within the veil of eternity while never leaving his existence in time. Stephen was filled with the Spirit and bore the countenance of one who lived in the presence of God's glory. Seeing Christ in His eternal glory was nothing new for Stephen.

Seeing Him standing *was*.

Stephen's boldness in confronting the enemies of the Gospel, exposing the foolishness of their charges and claims, and indicting them for their wicked rebellion against God, came as the outflow of a life lived daily in the presence of the risen Christ. You can't stare death in the face and fearlessly call its bluff, unless you live somehow further along the path than where death takes his stand to meet you.

Stephen lived in the then and there, here and now. He experienced the risen Christ on His throne in glory,

What We Must Do (1)

precisely as He is described in many places in Scripture. Stephen lived his life from that vantage point, that base of operations, and so he understood that this world is not only not our home, but also that this bodily life is not our real and final existence.

The source of such boldness

Where does the boldness of Stephen come from, which empowered him to confront the enemies of the Gospel and pull their skirts up over their heads?

Not from memorizing handy answers to Gospel objections. Not from avoiding conflicts and just being nice to people. Such boldness – such willingness to lay down one’s life for the truth – comes only from living day by day in the presence of our exalted King and Savior, Jesus Christ. From contemplating His works and joining Him to sow good Kingdom seed into every area of our Personal Mission Field. From truly understanding the times, knowing what we must do, and doing it faithfully at all times.

For Stephen, as for most of the early Christians, the Christian life could be defined as practicing the Kingship of Jesus (Acts 17.1-9). They knew Jesus as Lord. They experienced Him with them always, to the end of the age, or the end of their lives. And they knew Him where He was, in His glory, surrounded by saints and angels, seated in royal splendor and majesty, advancing His Kingdom, upholding the cosmos and everything in it, putting His enemies under His feet, and working all things together for the good for those who love Him and are called according to His purposes (Rev. 4-6).

No, Stephen’s surprise was not in seeing Christ. It was in seeing Him *standing* rather than seated – standing, we can be sure, to welcome home a faithful witness and martyr whose life stands as a gauntlet for every believer in Christ, showing us what we must do in seeking and advancing the Kingdom in this secular and narcissistic age.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by saying that Stephen was able to “live then and there, here and now”? Is this something every Christian should experience?
2. Meditate on Psalms 2, 16, 45, 47, 93, and 110. What picture of Jesus Christ, exalted in glory, do they create in your mind?
3. What does it mean to “set your mind” on the things that are above, where Christ is seated in heavenly places (Col. 3.1-3)? How would you encourage a fellow believer to practice this discipline?

Next steps – Conversation, Preparation: Do you and your Christian friends have a clear and compelling vision of the unseen realm? A vision like Stephen’s? Talk with some of your friends. Discuss what you know about this realm, and what it means to “set your mind” there (Col. 3.1-3). Begin developing your sense of spiritual vision until it becomes as clear and compelling as Stephen’s.

What We Must Do (1)

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How is it evident that Stephen understood the times in which he lived? How did he make himself a witness for Christ in those times?
2. Why is it important to our witness for Christ that we understand the times?
3. Can you show some examples of the inconsistencies, vanities, and follies of the secular and narcissistic worldview of our day? Why is it important that you be able to do this?
4. What do you need to do so that your witness for Christ becomes as powerful and effective as Stephen's? Are you prepared for the tares of this age to descend on you with scorn and opprobrium? Explain.
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you applying that lesson to your work in the Lord's field?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.