

## Session #3

### Stephen: The Model Witness Acts 6-7

Every believer intuitively knows that he should “witness.” Most of us have struggled with guilt because this is something we do so poorly.

#### TABLE TALK

Huddle with the men at your table and share a personal story about:

1. When someone “witnessed” to you.
  - \* How did you respond?
  - \* Was it a positive experience? Or negative?
  - \* What did you learn about “witnessing” from this encounter?
  
2. When you knew you should “witness” to someone else.
  - \* Did you? Why or why not?
  - \* How was it received?
  - \* What did you learn about “witnessing” from this encounter?

In Acts 22:20 we discover that Stephen, now dead for a number of years, has already been given a title.

*And when the blood of your witness/martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.  
(Acts 22:20).*

Perhaps no one else in all the New Testament helps us to better understand what it means to be a witness for Jesus Christ than Stephen. He is the model witness.

#### **I. The Call to be Witnesses.**

In Acts 1:8 Jesus made it clear that all of his followers were called to be witnesses.

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses (Greek, martur) in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8).*

This simple verse indicates six foundational truths about being a witness:

A. **All** Christians are called to be witnesses.

While only some are called to missionaries, prophets, pastors, evangelists... every child of God is called to be a witness. There are no exceptions. Acts 1:8 is addressed to all Christ followers.

Conclusion: The real question, therefore, is not “Are you a witness?” Rather, the real question is, “Are you a **good witness** or a bad one?”

B. The heart of the call is **to be** a witness.... not just **to do** witnessing.

It is biblically unsound to define “witnessing” only in terms of something we do: pass out tracts, share a testimony, talk to others about Jesus, etc. While our attempts to do witnessing are certainly important, the heart of Jesus’ call in Acts 1:8 relates to **who we are**...not what we do! When our walk doesn’t match our talk, we send mixed messages and the world cannot understand the Gospel we want them to believe.

Conclusion: Sometimes our actions speak so loudly that others **cannot hear** what we have to say!

*You’re writing a “gospel,”  
A chapter each day,  
By the deeds that you do,  
By the words that you say;  
Men read what you write,  
Whether faithless or true;  
Say, what is the “gospel”  
According to you?*

C. Witnessing is **about Jesus**.... and only secondarily **about me**.

Although witnesses will often tell “their story” when introducing others to Jesus, the essence of witnessing is always about him, not me! Acts 1:8 calls us to be his witnesses, not witnesses to ourselves. The goal is to cause others to say “What a great Savior!”, not “What a great story.”

Conclusion: The goal in witnessing is to introduce others **to Him!** My story is important only as it helps to achieve that goal.

D. A witness is one who is ready to **give his life** for what he believes.

The Greek word for “witness” is *martur* (*martus, marturos*). It referred to a testimony, or a report. Sometimes it referred to the evidence given, or proof. But even in the New Testament, this word began to take on a much deeper meaning. It began to refer to martyrdom!

- *And when the blood of your **witness/martyr** Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval.... (Acts 22:20).*
- *You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful **witness/martyr**, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives. (Rev. 2:13).*
- *And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the **witnesses/martyrs** of Jesus. (Rev. 17:6. NASB).*

Martin Luther King said it well: “If a man hasn’t discovered something he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.”

Conclusion: A witness is someone ready to lay down his life for what he believes. His **death** will proclaim to the world what he really believes!

E. Witnessing must begin **at home**.

The geographic references in Acts 1:8 are basically expanding concentric circles: Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the ends of the earth. (i.e. the Capital Region, the state of New York, the world).

Conclusion: Jesus intends that I have all three dimensions on my heart. However, my witness must begin “at home.” No amount of involvement in “foreign missions” can ever compensate for failure to be a witness among **my own family** and **closest friends**.

F. To be a witness requires **Pentecostal power**.

Look again at the five foundational truths of witnessing above. Who is equal to such a calling? We cannot meet these expectations in our own strength. We need divine empowerment. Precisely! That is the point.

Conclusion: The purpose of Pentecost is to transform ego-centric, self-absorbed sinners into holy men and women who live their lives **for others**!

## II. Stephen: the Model Witness (Acts 6-7).

<b>Qualifications of a deacon</b>	<b>Witnessing by word and by deed</b>				<b>Witnessing by death</b>		
	<b>By deed</b>		<b>By word</b>				
<b>6:1</b>	<b>6:7</b>	<b>6:8</b>	<b>6:15</b>	<b>7:1</b>	<b>7:53</b>	<b>7:54</b>	<b>8:1</b>

### A. Commentary of the text.

#### 1. Acts 6:1-7. Qualifications of a Deacon.

Notice some basic principles of **church government**.

- a) The apostles (senior leadership: Elders? Pastors?) knew that their primary role was to give themselves to “prayer and the ministry of the word” (6:4).
- b) “Deacons” were to assist the apostles by carrying out the logistical demands of life in the community (i.e. “waiting on tables.”) (6:2).
- c) Apostles were responsible for setting the qualifications for those who would serve in the church. They also determined how many “deacons” would be needed. (See 6:3). In this case, they stipulated the conditions for those qualified to administer the “budget” of the “food pantry” (6:3).
- d) What were the qualifications for “deacon” here? (See 6:3).
  - Of **good repute** (*martureo*).
  - Full of **the Spirit**.
  - Full of **wisdom**.
- e) The “congregation” then implemented the plan.

In this case, they “chose” (6:5) those who they believed were qualified and then “presented” (6:6) them to the apostles.

- f) The “apostles” then confirmed the congregation’s decision and commissioned these new leaders. In this case, the apostles “prayed for” them and “laid their hands on them.”

g) The result of good church government?

*So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. (6:7).*

## 2. Acts 6:8-15. Witness by deed.

a) His character attributes were known to all.

He was only a “layman” who “waited on tables”, but he did a little job in a big way! Note it well: it is not what you do, **but how you do it** that impacts the world.

Note Stephens’s character traits.

- Of good repute (6:3).
- Full of the Spirit (6:3) (6:5).
- Full of wisdom (6:3) (cf. 6:10; 7:55).
- Full of **faith** (6:5).

But in verses 8-15 we see other characteristics that helped to make Stephen the model witness:

- Full of **God’s grace** (6:8).
- Full of **God’s power** (6:8).

b) Further, Stephen’s godly character was visible in:

- i. The **miracles** he performed (6:8).
- ii. The **manner** in which he engaged in debate (6:9-10).
  - His wisdom.
  - His spirit.
- iii. The only way to bring a charge against him was to use “false witnesses (martur)” (6:11-14).
- iv. His **countenance** (“face like an angel”) (v. 15).

Nietzsche – “If you want me to believe in your Redeemer, then Christians will need to look more redeemed.”

### 3. Acts 7:1-53. Witness by word.

There is irony in the fact that although it was the apostles who were charged to give themselves to “the ministry of the word,” yet it was the “deacon” Stephen, one who was supposed to “wait on tables,” a layman, who preached the **longest sermon** in the book of Acts!

The sermon is remarkable and reveals other character traits about Stephen:

- a) He **knew his Bible** (our Old Testament) very, very well.
- b) Although he was “only” a layman, he was **bold** to go up against the theologically trained hierarchy of his day.
- c) He used Scripture not so much to prove a point, but as a means to confront people with the claims of Christ. Though respectful (“Brothers and fathers” - 7:1) he was **confrontational** when it came time to make a decision about Jesus Christ.
  - He reminds them of their pattern of rebellion. (“You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears!... You always resist the Holy Spirit!” 7:51).
  - He accuses them of the betrayal and murder of their own Messiah (7:52).
  - He points out where they have not lived up to their own standards (7:53).

### 4. Acts 7:54-8:1. Witness by death.

The total impact of Stephen’s witness (deeds and words) produced a violent reaction. His hearers:

- Were furious (7:54).
- Gnashed their teeth (7:54).
- Covered their ears (7:57).
- Yelled at the top of their voices (7:57).
- Became violent (7:57-58):
  - Rushing at him.
  - Dragging him away.
  - Throwing rocks hard enough to kill him!

This was not trial. It was **a lynching!**

Footnote: Saul was one of the “witnesses” (*martur*) to Stephen’s martyrdom. He saw Stephen’s life. He heard the sermon. He saw the way he died and heard his final prayer (7:58; 8:1). And witnessing the witness, Paul was never again the same! “The church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen”. Augustine

## B. Summary.

What made Stephen into the witness that he was? What were the traits that have made his life exemplary for all others who have been called to be witnesses?

A true, Gospel witness is someone who:

- 1) Has a passionate and vital **relationship** with Jesus Christ.

Stephen’s faith was not so much a religion as it was a relationship with the living God. Filled with the Spirit, filled with faith, filled with wisdom, filled with power... Stephen was a man **full of God!**

- 2) Has a comprehensive knowledge of **God’s Word**.

Although he was “only” a layman, Stephen knew his Bible very well. But not just isolated verses and stories, Stephen knew the Big Story, the History of Salvation. He understood the **plan of God for the ages** and especially how Jesus is the culmination of that plan.

- 3) Always knows that the **main thing** is to keep the **main thing** the **main thing**.

Stephen understood that being a witness is keeping the focus on Him! It’s not about me. The crux of the matter is Jesus. He is the main thing. The whole thrust of witnessing (in word and in deed) is to confront men and women with the choice they have to make: What, then, will you do with Jesus?

- Will you crucify him as a **liar**?
- Will you ignore him as a **lunatic**?
- Or will you worship him as **Lord**?

So it is not surprising that whenever Stephen gave his witness, there was **controversy** and **division**. Sometimes there was a riot. When Stephen showed up, people chose sides, depending on whether they were for or against Jesus Christ.

*Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided father*

*against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. (Luke 12:51-53).*

- 4) Lives a life motivated by **agape-love**.

When asked which commandment was the greatest, Jesus replied:

***Love the Lord** your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: **Love your neighbor** as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matt. 22:37-40).*

Stephen lived out the implications of this commandment to the fullest extent possible. His love for God was manifest in all that he did. But so was his love for his neighbors... even his enemies. That is why he wanted them to know so badly that the Messiah had come! That is why, even as he was being stoned, he forgave those who were murdering him.

*Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:60).*

- 5) Is **willing and ready to die** for his faith.

Stephen intuitively understood that being a witness for Jesus means laying his life on the line. Jesus had explained this to his followers.

*No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. (John 15:20-21).*

William Borden was a wealthy young man and heir to a fortune. He was a graduate of Yale. But he gave up everything for the privilege of being a missionary among the Muslims. On his way to the field, he died of cerebral meningitis in Egypt in 1913 at the age of 25. He had written in the cover of his Bible: "No reserve. No retreat. No regret."

- 6) Has **a story** to tell.

Although not prominent in the account of Stephen, there is another factor that is of great importance in being a witness: telling our story. A witness is someone who is able to succinctly tell the story of how he came to faith in Christ and God's grace transformed his life.

In the book of Acts, the primary example of this aspect of witnessing is the Apostle Paul. Three times (!) in Acts we see his story being told:

- Acts 9:1-19.  
    Luke's account of Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road.
- Acts 22:1-21.  
    Paul gives his testimony before a hostile crowd in Jerusalem.
- Acts 26:9-23.  
    Paul tells his story again before King Agrippa (he is on trial).

Looking at these three accounts, we see several important features of what a testimony should include:

- 1) It should not be **long**.

This testimony, the most famous one in history, takes about two and a half minutes to give. Paul had cut out all the superfluous elements and condensed his testimony to its most fundamental essence.

- 2) It is **well rehearsed**.

In the book of Acts, we have two instances of Paul giving his testimony. The two accounts are quite similar. Apparently, Paul had a simple outline in his head of the main ingredients of his story and, whenever he had the chance, he told it to anyone who would listen.

- 3) There are **three** basic parts to any testimony.

If you analyze Paul's story, you find that each time it is told, there are three basic components.

- a. My life before Christ.

- I had a religious upbringing and education.
- I was obsessed in my hatred of Christianity.
- I did everything I knew to exterminate Christians from the face of the earth.
- I helped to kill Stephen.
- I practiced religion but had no inner peace.

b. How I met Christ

- When? About noon.
- Where? On a road near Damascus.
- What happened? A light. A voice. I suddenly realized the error of my ways!
- Jesus met me! He spoke words of peace.
- Jesus said he had a plan for my life.
- I surrendered my will to His! I turned from my sin and put my faith in Jesus Christ.

c. My life since I met Christ.

- I have told this story to everyone who will listen.
- I have not been disobedient to the heavenly vision.
- I have been His witness before Jews, Gentiles, kings, and princesses.
- I have suffered for the sake of his Name.

**TABLE TALK**

1. Following the three-part outline described above, tell your story to the men at your table. Make sure the men time you! Not more than two minutes each!
  - \* My life before Christ.
  - \* How I met Christ.
  - \* My life since I met Christ.
2. Use the sheet attached (page 3-11) and take time this week to write your story in a manner that you can give it in two minutes.

**“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of  
the church”**

**Tertullian**

My Life Before I Met Christ:

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How I Met Christ:

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My Life Since I Met Christ:

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