

ACTS: ALIGNING WITH GOD'S SOVEREIGN WORK OF DISCIPLING

XV. Stephen's Effective Witness

(Acts 7:1-60)

I. Introduction

- A. The book of Acts explains "the orderly and sovereignly directed progress of the kingdom message from Jews to Gentiles, and from Jerusalem to Rome," Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament, p. 351.
- B. Accordingly, we can learn much about aligning our ministry efforts with God's sovereign work from studying the Early Church era as it is presented in the book of Acts.
- C. Acts 7:1-60 presents the effective witness of Stephen, the Church's first martyr, and we view the passage for insight and application (as follows):

II. Stephen's Effective Witness, Acts 7:1-60.

- A. When brought before the Sanhedrin and asked by the high priest whether the charges against him were true, Stephen did not give a legal defense, but sought to vindicate the Christian faith, *Ibid.*, p. 369.
- B. Seeking to gain a hearing, Stephen directed the attention of the members of the Sanhedrin to Israel's beloved Biblical history, relating that history throughout his address.
- C. The main point in Stephen's address was that Israel's religious leaders were opposing God's plans and His messengers just like Israel's forefathers had always done throughout Israel's history, Acts 7:2-53:
 1. Stephen explained that when God called Abraham in Mesopotamia to leave his country and kinfolk and go to a country that God would show him that Abraham initially moved only to Haran, Acts 7:2-4a.
 2. Once Abraham arrived in Canaan, God told him that he would not acquire possession of the land in his earthly life, but that Abraham's offspring would later acquire it following bondage in a foreign land for four hundred years, Acts 7:4b-7. However, when Abraham's offspring arrived, they rejected Joseph whom the Lord would later use to save them all from starvation, selling him into bondage in Egypt, Acts 7:8-16.
 3. Once Abraham's offspring ended up in Egyptian bondage and God intended to use Moses to deliver them from Egypt, Israel rejected him to where Moses fled into Midian until the Lord retrieved Moses to use him with mighty signs and wonders to deliver Israel in the Exodus, Acts 7:17-38.
 4. However, even after God used Moses to bring Israel out of Egypt, Israel rejected him and urged Aaron to make a golden calf for them to worship, and God rejected that generation in the wilderness, Acts 7:39-43.
 5. After Moses had led Israel to build the tabernacle and they had arrived in the Promised Land, Israel's king David sought to build a permanent temple for the Lord, and David's son Solomon actually constructed it, Acts 7:44-47. Nevertheless, the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 66:1-2 testified that God's infinite immensity could not be contained in a building built by man when heaven was His throne and the earth His footstool opposite the excessive regard Israel's religious leaders had for their temple in Stephen's day, Acts 7:48-50.
 6. Stephen then applied the pattern of the sins of their forefathers to the Sanhedrin, Acts 7:51-53:
 - a. He charged them as being spiritually rebellious in resisting the Holy Spirit as had their fathers, Acts 7:51.
 - b. Stephen claimed that like their forefathers who persecuted and slew the prophets of God of the past, those prophets who had predicted the arrival of the Just One, the Messiah, they themselves in Stephen's day had now become the murderers of that promised Messiah, Acts 7:52.
 - c. Like their forefathers, though having received the Mosaic Law through the agency of angels, they with their forefathers had not obeyed it, Acts 7:53.
 7. The effect of this address was very great, resulting in Stephen's martyrdom, Acts 7:54-60:
 - a. Stephen's message infuriated his audience, but Stephen testified that he saw the heavens open to reveal the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of the Father, Acts 7:54-55.
 - b. When Stephen told the Sanhedrin what he saw, the religious body stopped their ears, convinced they were hearing blasphemy, and they rushed upon him, taking him out and stoning him to death, Acts 7:56-59.
 - c. Stephen asked God not to charge his audience with the sin of his martyrdom before dying, Acts 7:60.

Lesson: Stephen's effective witness was not self-defensive, but a vindication of the Christian faith for his listeners to heed it to be saved. He utilized Israel's beloved Biblical history to try to gain a positive hearing and clarified the need for his listeners to handle the issue of sin in repentance for rejecting Christ that they might be saved.

Application: To witness effectively like Stephen, may we also rely on the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:55 with Galatians 5:16) and utilize gracious, penetrating speech (Colossians 4:5-6) that deals with sin and salvation through Christ.