

- Can we recite a general history of God’s people just as Stephen did?
- Can we illustrate how the Church began and how those who departed from the faith created a multitude of denominations that do not have Scriptural support but *do* nevertheless attract large audiences of devoted followers?
- Should we have *some* familiarity with the numerous “man created religions” of the world that exist to appeal to the senses and emotions?

The bottom line is that all of mankind seeks spirituality on some level. Confusion exists however, in the religious world today because there is more ignorance about God and Scripture than there is *knowledge* about God and Scripture. Mankind has — throughout history — had a consistent habit of placing his senses *above* his understanding of the truth of the Scriptures. In other words — if it *feels* good and right, it must *be* good and right. That idea produces man made religions — not Biblical faith, based on truth. And *that* is the idea we will most often find ourselves having to defend against.

So how *do* we defend? We can’t go wrong following — as Stephen did — the Scriptural history of God’s people — *concluding* with an account of the establishment of the church of which we are a part. One of the greatest challenges we may face in doing that, is the fact that many in the world today, give greater credence to *later* accounts — accounts that were recorded at a time when there had *already* been numerous departures from the faith. The only *completely accurate* recordings we have would be the words spoken by Christ and the apostles — and those are found *in the Bible*. To use documents, books or writings penned *after* the close of the New Testament is a trap into which we should not fall. We cannot and must not go beyond Scripture in our defense of salvation through Christ and *only* through Christ. To do so permits inclusion of any and every perversion that occurred *after* Scripture was penned. Just as with Stephen, our defense is our belief and faith in Christ — nothing more or less. Once that message — found *only* in the Scriptures, is delivered, we have done all that we can. The rest is in the hands of our accusers.

Will it take as forceful an action upon *us* (like Stephen faced) before we will proclaim our faith in Christ — or will we speak willingly each time we have the opportunity? Will we *choose* to remain silent — fearful of discussing politics and religion? Every time we make the *choice* to defend our faith in Christ, we provide a soul the opportunity to accept or reject his or her Savior. We should have the courage to allow others to have the chance to make a decision *before* we find ourselves having to defend our *own* decision to follow Christ *after* our freedom to do so has been withdrawn. Stephen was willing to proclaim *his* belief in the Truth — it proved to be *fatal* to *him*. How dedicated are *we* to sharing our faith?

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DILIGENCE

“We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.” — Hebrews 6:11

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Fatal Truth

We live in unusual times. Right seems to be seen as wrong and wrong is viewed as right. To suggest that things aren’t like they used to be is an understatement. But, we are told that historically, civilizations cycle through ups and downs and everything will soon cycle back to what we would refer to as a more sensible outlook on life. If indeed we can rely on this “cycle” idea, the particular “cycle” of civilization in which we seem to find ourselves at the present time is a serious challenge to Christians who are determined to remain focused on moving forward as dedicated followers of God’s Word.

As we read Scriptural accounts of the lives of numerous people — in both the Old and New Testaments — we see that both triumph and tragedy was a part of each era. There is of course one *overriding* triumph that defines who *we* are as believers and where we are going. *That* triumph is the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We have the *choice* whether or not to place faith in that wonderful triumph. That faith is not forced upon us nor can it be forcibly taken *from* us. Our faith is perhaps the *only* thing in our lives in which we have *total* control. Faith is the means by which we choose our eternal destiny — and it is *ours* — to keep or to lose.

There are several accounts in the Scriptures about those who had so firm a faith that they were *arrested* for holding to their faith in the risen Savior. While it may be difficult for *us* to envision being brought before a court and charged with a violation against the government *because* of our faith in Jesus Christ, if we *were* to be arrested on such a charge, how would we respond? What if that crime was punishable by death for those found guilty? Would we deny the charge and sight people of other faiths who had not been similarly charged? Would we — out of consideration for our loved ones — lie to the authorities so that we might be able to live out the rest of our lives caring for those whom we love? Or would we find the best lawyers to seek protection under our right to free speech? What *would* we do?

Let’s take a look at our brother Stephen — the first martyr recorded for us in the New Testament. We are introduced to Stephen in Acts 6 where we learn that he was chosen as one of seven men to serve the needs of a growing congregation. The criteria the apostles used to screen the men who would serve in that capacity is listed in verse 3 of Acts 6.

“Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.”

(NKJV)

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Stephen was one of the seven men chosen and verse 5 states that he was “*a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.*”

As the account goes, verse 8 states that Stephen “*did great wonders and signs among the people.*” But there was trouble because of his actions.

“*Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’ And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 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 6:9-14 NKJV)*

Yes — controversy broke out. Lies were told concerning his teaching and intentions and he was brought before the council. The Jews were concerned about *any* teaching that would undercut the relevance of *their* teaching and doctrines regardless of its merit.

So what did Stephen do? He answered the controversy by presenting a history of something with which they were familiar. He started with Abraham, went all the way through the history of the Israelites and concluded with these words —

“*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.*” (Acts 7:51-53 NKJV)

Stephen’s entire historical account (Acts 7) explained how God provided Christ as the Savior of mankind. But he was upsetting the people of his time with a message that threatened their faith. So distressed were they, that they became angry and took him out and stoned him to death. His final words were —

“*Lord, do not charge them with this sin.*” (Acts 7:60 NKJV)

Hopefully, we will never be placed in a situation like that of Stephen. We know however, that in some parts of the world today Christians *are* dying because of their faith. As of yet, it has not come to our shores. If we were to find ourselves in a similar situation today, charges would of course come from a different set of people — with different reasons for being as angry as were Stephen’s accusers.

Today’s opposition would hold a contemporary belief that Jesus Christ is *not* the Son of God and the Savior of mankind. And because of our proclaiming that Jesus Christ is the *only* way to God, they would claim (they *do* claim) that our teaching of such a thing is condemning all non-believers and we are thus participating

in hate speech. Does this *really* sound much different than in Stephen’s day? Stephen was doing nothing more than proclaiming God’s Word. If those to whom he spoke felt condemned, it was God who was condemning them — not Stephen. And a way was available for them to *escape* the condemnation of God. It is the same with Christians today. Our message is not one of condemnation, but one of salvation. The problem lies with those who cannot bear to hear that *faith* must be placed in God and in Christ — the risen Savior — not in themselves and/or what they can sense or in some way prove.

So if we *did* find ourselves in a situation similar to that of Stephen’s — and we were given the option of denying that our salvation *is* through Christ — and *only* through Him — and that the Scriptures *are* a reliable foundation for our faith, would truth or self preservation become our driving force? Would we have the strength and confidence to stand for our faith or is our faith something we find comfort in, as long as it need not be defended? If we chose to stand firm and *defend* our faith just as Stephen did, where would we start with our defense? What could we say? What did Stephen know that would be helpful to us in a similar situation?

First, he *knew* the God of the Bible and the history of God’s people. Second, he knew his accusers. He knew their background and the *basis* for their *lack* of belief in Christ. This knowledge along with the help of the Holy Spirit, allowed him to present to the council pertinent information that could not be refuted.

“*...they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.*” (Acts 6:10 NKJV)

The reaction when truth comes in direct contact with falsehood can be explosive. Such was the case with Stephen.

“⁵⁴*When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth....* ⁵⁷*Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord;* ⁵⁸*and they cast him out of the city and stoned him.*” (Acts 7:54 and 57-58 NKJV)

The clash between truth and falsehood brings out the worst in those who oppose God. Fear of facing such an ugly and uncomfortable clash is what drives many people to say, “I don’t discuss politics and religion!” That statement is nothing more than a means to avoid having to *defend* ones belief with those who may quite possibly react in an explosive way when confronted with truth.

There are some questions we may want to think very carefully about as we consider the defense *we* might use if ever we were confronted the way Stephen was.

- Would it be wise for us to have an *understanding* of the various oppositions to the Gospel today?
- Would it be wise to recognize and understand how opposition to Christ has *evolved*?
- Should we be able to speak to those who oppose Christ with an *understanding* of *why* they reject Him?