

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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Stephen's Martyrdom

Read Acts 7:1—8:1a

Key verse: "As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, accept my life!'" (Acts 7:59)

The story of Stephen's martyrdom is inspirational in so many ways. But as I read it again, I am struck with what Stephen's death says about being an effective witness for Jesus Christ. In its original meaning, the word *martyr* meant "witness." This account of Christianity's first martyr speaks volumes about how to be an effective witness for Christ.

Consider the effect of Stephen's martyrdom/witness on the "young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58). Saul, the Christian hater, was soon to become Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles and arguably the most influential proponent of the Christian faith. This is the same man who took care of the coats of those who stoned Stephen (7:58), and "was in full agreement with Stephen's murder" (8:1). The effect of Stephen's witness on Paul is a powerful example of how no one is impossible for God to reach and change.

What was it about Stephen's witness through martyrdom that had such a powerful effect on Paul? And what does Stephen's witness through martyrdom say to us today about how to be an effective witness for Christ? The answers, I believe, are described in these three phrases: *holy boldness*, *authentic commitment*, and *Christ-like love*.

1. Holy boldness

Theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote: "When one preaches Christianity in such a way that the echo answers, 'Away with that man, he does not deserve to live,' know that this is the Christianity of the New Testament."

Dorothy Sayers wrote: "I believe it to be a grave mistake to present Christianity as something charming and popular with no offence in it. We cannot blink the fact that gentle Jesus meek and mild was so stiff in His opinions and inflammatory in His language that He was thrown out of church, stoned, hunted from place to place, and finally gibbeted as a firebrand and a public danger. Whatever his peace was, it was not the peace of an amiable indifference."

There is no questioning the boldness with which Stephen confronted his accusers with truth: “You stubborn people! In your thoughts and hearing, you are like those who have had no part in God’s covenant! You continuously set yourself against the Holy Spirit, just like your ancestors did. Was there a single prophet your ancestors didn’t harass? They even killed those who betrayed and murdered him! You received the Law given by angels, but you haven’t kept it” (7:51-53).

Now, our witness does not always need to be as confrontational as Stephen’s. But I think sometimes, in our desire to be loving and kind—and because of our fear of rejection—we fail to speak needed truth. There are times when we need some of Stephen’s holy boldness in our witness to others. When we are bold, some people will reject us or even try to silence us. But others, like Paul, will be convicted by the truth we share and will eventually be changed because of our willingness to be bold in sharing the truth.

2. Authentic commitment

Another reason Stephen’s witness was so powerful was because of his authentic commitment to Jesus. People can tell if we really mean what we say about Jesus. People want to know if we really believe it or not.

When we demonstrate our willingness to follow Christ even when it leads to personal sacrifice, others will know that our faith is real. People will see that our commitment to Christ is authentic when they see that we are willing to sacrifice our own self-interest.

There are other factors that contribute to an effective witness for Christ. But if people are to believe what we say about Jesus, we must demonstrate an authentic commitment to following Him, whatever the cost.

3. Christ-like love

Yes, Stephen’s martyrdom/witness demonstrated holy boldness and authentic commitment. But his witness would have been ineffective without the third indispensable ingredient, Christ-like love: “As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, accept my life!’ Falling to his knees, he shouted, ‘Lord, don’t hold this sin against them!’ Then he died” (7:59-60).

No witness can be effective unless it demonstrates Christ-like love: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I can remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing....And now

abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, 13).

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