

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
October 7, 2012

Stephen's Arrest and Speech

Read Acts 6:8-7:2a

Key verse: "Stephen, who stood out among the believers for the way God's grace was at work in his life and for his exceptional endowment with divine power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8).

Comfortable or Conformed?

About his conversion to Christ, C.S. Lewis said: "I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."

Lewis' quote calls into question some of today's sales pitches for Christianity, which essentially say: Follow Jesus and your life will be happy, healthy, and prosperous. For that matter, Jesus' own words call into question that idea. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 6:24).

Yes, following Christ brings joy, peace, purpose, plus life abundant and eternal. But the call of Christ is not a call to an easy chair. It is a call to take up the cross. Real Christianity means *not being comfortable but being conformed*, that is, being conformed to the image of Christ.

The story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, should remind every Christ-follower of these truths. Though we will not all be called to die for our faith, we all are called to take up the cross and follow—even when following Jesus takes us way beyond our comfort zones!

Why Religious People Fight

Gary Thompson, writing in Cokesbury's *Adult Bible Studies* for October 7, 2012, makes an interesting application of our text (Acts 6:8-7:2a). Noting that "Stephen was arrested and actually charged with being too innovative," Thompson cites Acts 6:14: "In fact, we heard him say that this man Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and alter the *customary practices* Moses gave us" (italics added for emphasis).

Thompson further observes: “Perhaps as contemporary Christians we should be careful about our attitudes regarding customary practices. Many American churches today are engaged in internal conflicts over issues of innovation. For example, in every church I have personally been involved with in the past 20 or more years, we have experienced conflicts regarding the use of video screens and contemporary music styles. The guiding principle should be that we be careful not to compromise the essential truths of the gospel, but there has always been innovation in regard to how that gospel is communicated....God cannot be happy when a congregation splits over such issues.”

I am reminded of a quote attributed to Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric: “When the rate of change inside an organization is slower than the rate of change outside an organization, the end [of that organization] is in sight.” Does this apply to the church?

If so, it explains why every generation of Christians has felt the need to find new ways to bring the unchanging gospel to a new generation of people. St. Patrick led new and innovative methods of bringing the gospel to Ireland. St. Francis led innovation that helped produce a fresh understanding of Christ’s love. Martin Luther led dramatic change to a church mired in corruption. John and Charles Wesley took the gospel to the streets and mines of 18th-century England. The Wesleys were constantly innovating—preaching in the streets, championing the cause of poor people and fighting slavery, daring to look at their world and ask, “What has to be done to connect with lost, struggling people in order to win them to Christ?”

How Not to Have a Church Fight

A look at church history shows that Christians have frequently changed the church’s methods while holding on to its core beliefs. Yet, change often brings conflict. Whenever the church’s “customary practices” are being changed, some people in the church will be unhappy. So, innovation and change are necessary. But working through issues such as *changing worship styles, new ways of organizing the church for mission rather than maintenance, etc.*, can be difficult. Such work calls for grace, patience, and love as changes in the church are considered and implemented.

Stephen’s story offers one more sobering reminder, that is, *how not to have a church fight*. You see, when Stephen’s detractors opposed him for altering their religion’s “customary practices,” things spun out of control. When they could not silence Stephen, they resorted to working behind the scenes in a way that “stirred up the people” against Stephen (Acts 6:12).

They presented “false witnesses” against Stephen—that is, they resorted to outright lies (Acts 6:13). And finally, their attacks killed Stephen, literally.

Sometimes Christians will disagree. When innovation and change in the church’s “customary practices” are being considered, some disagreement is probably inevitable. But let us never resort to “stirring the pot” through gossip and criticism in order to get our way. And let us never “kill” one another through misinformation and character assassination. God surely cannot be happy with such behavior.

As we deal with change in the church, may we treat each other with such humility, love, and forgiveness that the Head of the Church—Jesus Christ—may never have cause to say to any of us, “This is my Body, broken by you.”

(Contact Michael at msigler@fumcfwb.com.)