

# Explore the Bible Series for June 15: Stephen: Boldness

June 9, 2008

• Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-60

The dictionary defines “boldness” as “fearlessness; courageousness.” It perhaps most often is associated with those who demonstrate conspicuous bravery in the face of real physical danger. Yet we also talk of the boldness of those who confidently express their ideas and opinions in the face of possible disagreement.

Most people have little problem summoning the boldness to state their convictions in discussions of sports or politics. Yet many believers find it difficult to verbally affirm their faith in a crowd of unbelievers. Fear of rejection or ridicule is typically the reason given for their hesitancy. Yet all believers know the message of the gospel is far more important than any particular opinions concerning the best team or any specific political issue. God has commissioned all believers as heralds of great news and calls on us to do so boldly.

The book of Acts contains the stories of the leaders of the early church and their commitment to faithfully spread the message. Among those stories is that of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Stephen stands for all time as a model of boldness in professing and defending faith in Jesus.

## **Bold in discussion (Acts 6:8-10)**

As the early church began to spread and grow under the leadership of the apostles, it quite naturally came into conflict with the Jewish religious

leaders. As they had with Jesus, these rabbis saw the believers as proclaiming a message that called for neglecting or even denying the validity of the old traditions. In addition, they noted the fact that the leaders of the new church were fishermen who had no formal religious training, and so they sought to engage them in debates in order to discredit them.

On one such occasion, Stephen, who had just been selected as one of the first deacons, faced a gathering of rabbis representing several geographical regions and ideological positions. They almost certainly disputed with him on a number of theological issues and came from different angles, yet the Bible states they could not prevail against the wisdom with which he spoke.

There is no indication Stephen ever had formally studied philosophy or theology. Acts 6:5 simply states he was filled with the Holy Spirit. It is that presence within the life of every believer that gives us boldness as witnesses. We need not feel the response of someone else because the Spirit will empower us and give us the words to say.

### **Bold amid hostility (Acts 6:11-15)**

In response to their failure to overcome Stephen in the debate, the rabbis sought to incite the crowd against him by claiming he had blasphemed and condemned Jewish traditions. Although verse 15 indicates they saw no contempt in him, opposition began to arise against Stephen. Knowing how they had treated Jesus, Stephen perhaps began to sense they intended to silence him. Stephen faced consequences to his continued profession which were far more dire than rejection or ridicule. Yet he continued to unapologetically proclaim the gospel.

Indeed, as the hostility against him rose, he stood in the midst of the crowd and clearly explained how their own traditions had pointed to Jesus

(chapter 7). At the end of his elaborate argument, Stephen boldly accused the religious leaders of being the ones who had denied the truth. They had studied their own history and knew what the ancient prophets had said, but had refused to believe it.

Such a harsh and explicit accusation to the face of the religious leadership certainly required unusual boldness on the part of Stephen. The Bible tells us the gospel message is a “stone of stumbling and a rock of offense” to those who do not believe. As we share its message, we will confront resistance. Yet while many choose to be silent at the first signs of opposition, Stephen’s story shows us it is at those times that the Spirit of God within us provides all we need to remain bold even amid hostility.

### **Bold to the end (Acts 7:54-60)**

Having been directly confronted and accused in such a manner, the rabbis responded in anger and had Stephen stoned. Even as they were raging around him, Stephen remained calm and continued to proclaim what he saw. Perhaps as a reward for his boldness and a means of peace and reassurance, Stephen is granted a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God in heaven. Stephen’s boldness continued as he accepted their judgment and even asked God to forgive them as he died.

It is easy for believers today to read this story and attribute Stephen’s boldness to some special position or calling. We often can see these early believers who maintained a bold profession even to death as having some special level of commitment that is beyond us. Yet the biblical accounts of their lives seem to indicate that these were ordinary men and women, no different than believers today.

In fact, believers today have the benefit of 2,000 years of church history that clearly demonstrates God’s unfailing faithfulness in upholding those

who follow him. Even today, there are tens of thousands each year who pay with their lives for simply professing faith in Jesus. Indeed, God had called all believers to boldly proclaim the Truth in word and deed and in all circumstances, whether peaceful or hostile. And we can do so fearlessly and courageously knowing God's Spirit of boldness lives in us.