

Place: Lurgan Baptist: 27:2:2007

Reading: Acts 7:1-36, 51-60

THE CHURCH ABLAZE

15. IN DEFENCE OF THE FAITH

In 1982 the Pope of Rome visited, Scotland, England and Wales, and encouraged Roman Catholics to participate fully in the search for Christian unity with other “believers.” At Bellahouston Park in Glasgow he said to a gather ring of people from many traditions. “*We are only pilgrims on this earth making our way towards that heavenly kingdom promised to us as God’s children. Beloved brethren in Christ for the future can we not make that pilgrimage together hand in hand.*” The World Council of Churches drive for unification accelerated in 1987 when a conference was held in Swanick Derbyshire. The meeting numbered 330 people representing 32 or 33 different denominations. This conference became the birthplace for ecumenical instruments or a blue print for union with Rome.

My let us not delude ourselves into thinking that the Ecumenical Movement has scaled down. On 15th June 1989 the headline in the Belfast Telegraph ran, “*Bishop Edward Daly became the first senior Roman Catholic cleric to address a conference of the Methodist church.*” In May 1991 the same paper bore the caption, “*Catholics*

on the march for Jesus.” It said, “*Presbyterian ministers, brethren, catholic priests all can be seen taking part.*” On Saturday 10th May 1997 the Gibraltar Chronicle bore this headline, “*Historic Day for Lady of Europe Shrine.*” It went on, “*A major historical event takes in Gibraltar today as we witness the enthronement of the ancient statue of our Lady of Europe and the reconstruction of the Continent of Europe. The shrine of our Lady of Europe a monument steeped in history is where it will all happen.*” In the words of Bishop Devlin, “*the light has been extinguished for hundreds of years but we are about to rekindle it again. It will not be a light for sailors but a light to guide Europe into the Third Millennium.*” In more recent years the death of Diana, Princess of Wales evoked a universal outpouring of grief, and without doubt her death and those who died with her was an occasion for genuine sadness. But my What about the spiritual vacuum of the masses of people who milled around the Royal Palaces in London ? What about the failure of so called Christian leaders to make plain God’s way of salvation ? What about the idea that “*all roads lead to God ?*”

What about the absence of a word from God ? Then of course we witnessed the death of the Pope and for a week or more the Roman Catholic hierarchy had the world’s media dancing to their tune. Many so called Christian leaders referred to the Pope “*as the most astounding Christian leader of our day and generation.*” Then we witnessed what most of us thought what would never happen. A Roman Catholic priest being involved at the farewell and induction of Baptist pastor in a Baptist

Church. Do you remember that ? It was towards the end of 2002. Think of all that we have witnessed in these past number of years. “ *Power to change,*” “ *the Kansas City prophets,*” The “ *March for Jesus,*” all geared to bring us all together, regardless of truth. Has it stopped ? No ! Let me read to you an article that was sent to me by a brother in Christ. It appeared in the Sunday Mirror of 24th September 2006 in the Republic of Ireland. The title of the article was,

“ **Guinness is God for you,**” by Naomi McElroy

Fancy a pint with your prayers ? Four denominations have joined forces to bring people back to Jesus by holding a gospel night in a pub. Now lucky locals can enjoy a swift one while learning about the Lord. Presbyterian minister, William Hayes explains, ‘ *Its called The Alpha Course,*’ *it’s a basic introduction to Christianity.* We decided to hold it in a pub because we thought people might be less intimidated in a pub than in a church. After all some of them mightn’t have been inside a church in years. It’s a more relaxed atmosphere in the pub. We hope people wouldn’t be afraid to come in.” And it seems to be working. *The Alpha Course started a week ago when Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches in Tullamore, Co, Offaly, joined together to teach people about Jesus.* The 12 week course hopes to examine the life of Christ and focus on his teachings. But instead of a church they are preaching in Dempsey’s bar on Tullamore’s High Street. And it’s already a roaring success.

Thrilled William said, ‘ There were 40 there on the first night, which was the introductory night. That’s really good numbers for a first night.’ *The course hopes to concentrate on what the four religions have in common instead of what divides them.* William fears many people are scarred away from a church setting but in the familiar surroundings of a pub they can relax. He said, “ *Alpha Courses themselves are very common,* they’ve been operating in Ireland for many years. Mainly though they are held in a church or someone’s house. The only way we are a little bit different is we decided to hold it in the pub. We are holding this course in Dempsey’s because it is such a relaxed and welcoming place so that people who would not normally feel comfortable in a church can join in.” But he admits he pinched the idea from another Alpha group. He said, “ *I heard about a group in Bray who were thinking of holding there’s in a pub. I don’t know if they went through with it. I never had an original thought in my head.*” End of article.

Can I say first of all, that “ *what the four religions have in common,*” is the supposed focus. The reality is, that on the gospel, Catholicism and the other’s churches confessions have **nothing in common, what divides them is truth.** Then again, Rome’s “ *Jesus,*” is not the Jesus of the Scriptures, and finally any “ *an introduction to Christianity,*” should focus supremely on Christ’s redemptive work and not “ *his teachings.*”
(1 Cor 9:16 15:1-4)

My we might ask, “ *what is taking place in our day ? Where is it all going to end ?*” One thing is sure, the

Scriptures leave us in no doubt as how to we should act in a day of crisis. The Lord Jesus warned his disciples, “*beware of false prophets.*” (Matt 17:15) Paul echoes His Master when he cries, “*But though we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached let him be accursed.*” (Gal 1:8) John tells us, “*beloved believe not every spirit but try the spirits whether they are of God because many false prophets are gone into the world.*” (1 Jn 4:1) My in this age in which we live Christians must be able to defend their faith. When Paul instructed Titus to appoint as pastors or elders men who were capable of “*holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.*” (Titus 1:9) it was not only to silence the rebellious, empty talking deceivers (Titus 1:10) but also to teach the people so well that they could do the same.

Peter instructed believers in general to “*be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.*” (1 Pet 3:15) Sadly, many Christians are unable to do that, having little or no understanding of why they believe. Lacking a solid foundation for their faith, they are easily, “*tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine.*” (Eph 4:14) Now apologetics is the study of the defence of the faith. The English word derives from the Greek word apologia which means “*a speech of defence of something.*” In (Acts 25:16) it describes an accused persons defence at his trial. Paul gave an apologia to the angry mob at Jerusalem in (Acts Ch 22) To the

Philippian Christians he wrote, “*I am set for the defence of the gospel.*” (Phil 1:16) In that opening verses of that Book he spoke about “*the defence and confirmation of the gospel.*” (1:7) And that statement underscores the two sides of apologetics, defending the faith against attack, and presenting the true claims of Christianity to unbelievers. Now Paul was not only adept at presenting the gospel but he was one of its ablest defenders. In (Ch 17) of this book we see the great apologist at work. Now like Paul all Christians are to “*earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.*” (Jude 3) There was however, a great defender of the faith before Paul, and his name was Stephen. You see, unable to better Stephen in open debate, his opponents trumped up false charges of blasphemy against him. They then seized and hauled him before the Sanhedrin for trial. Now as (Ch 7) opens Stephen’s trial begins.

The main part of this chapter consists of Stephen’s defence against the false charges brought against him. He stood accused of blaspheming God, Moses, the law, and the temple, the most serious charges imaginable in Jewish society. This passage presents Stephen’s fourfold defence against the false charges of blasphemy brought against him. Now for the sake of clarity and simplicity I have divided this chapter into two.

(1) THE DEFENCE OF STEPHEN

Now remember the Sanhedrin was the ruling body of the nation, under the ultimate authority of the Romans, it was also its supreme court. I wonder can you get this picture in

your mind ? The Sanhedrin comprised of 71 men. There were 22 lawyers, 22 elders, and 26 priests with the High Priest presiding. From what I gather they were arranged in a semi-circular fashion and the accused was made to stand in the centre of the circle. The High Priest, probably Caiaphas who was in office until 36 AD began the proceedings by asking Stephen, “ *Are these things so ?* ” He was asking, “ *How do you plead to the charges against you, guilty or not guilty ? Have you blasphemed God and Moses ? Have you ridiculed the Law and the Temple?* ” What followed was one of the most amazing and potent sermons ever preached. This is the longest message in the book of Acts and one of the most important. In a message that covers fifty three verses and 2000 thousand years of Jewish history, Stephen reviews the history of Israel, and at the same times establishes that he is not guilty of blaspheming God, Moses, the Law or the Temple. His accusers however, were because they rejected the Messiah.

Now if I were to pick a key verse out of this sermon it would be (7:51) Stephen proved his point by citing the simple facts of Jewish history and climaxing with the contemporary rejection of Christ. Now I want you to see that in his defence Stephen speaks of the nation,

(a) ISRAEL AND THEIR SOVEREIGN:

Do you recall the first charge against Stephen? ***Blasphemy against God.*** How does he reply ? ***Not guilty !*** Look if you will at (7:2-3) Stephen does three things here. He establishes that he believes fully in the God of Israel. He

acknowledges the fatherhood of Abraham over Israel. Then he declares his belief in God’s sovereign control of Israel’s destiny. Do you know what that amounted to ? Not guilty. Its interesting that Stephen’s message opens with the “ *the God of glory,* ” and closes with “ *the glory of God,* ” and all the time he spoke his face radiated that same glory. Why ? Because Israel was the only nation privileged to have the glory of God as part of its inheritance. (Rom 9:4) Do you recall that the glory of God had departed first from the tabernacle (1 Sam 4:19) and then from the temple (Ezek 10:4, 18) God’s glory had come in His Son (Jn 1:14) but the nation had rejected Him. Now Stephen cited the history of Abraham because the Jews prided themselves in being “ *his children.* ” The sad thing was they confused physical descent with spiritual experience and depended on their national heritage rather than their personal faith. Do you recall that John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Himself warned about this very thing ? (Matt 3:7-12 Jn 8:33-59)

These Jews were blind to the simple faith of Abraham and the patriarchs, they had cluttered it, with their man made traditions, that made salvation a matter of good works and not faith. My God has no grandchildren. Each of us must be born into the family of God through personal faith in Jesus Christ. (Jn 1:11-13) For the Jews, the fulfilling of the ritual, (like circumcision) had taken the place of the enjoyment of the reality. My can the same thing not happen in our churches today ? We can be more caught up with ritual than reality, with tradition than truth, with formalism than spirituality. A pastor told me some time ago that some of his church objected because he

changed the format of the service, a little trying to get away from hymn, prayer, hymn. Do you know what that is ? Man made tradition. The Jews had plenty of it. But notice that Stephen goes on to talk about,

(b) ISRAEL AND THEIR SAVIOURS:

Do you recall the second charge laid against Stephen ? ***Blasphemy against Moses.*** (6:11) Again, Stephen pleads, “ ***not guilty.***” Now both Joseph and Moses have this in common, they were both rejected as deliverers the first time, but were accepted the second time. Stephen speaks here of,

1. Their Rejection of Joseph:

Look if you will at (7:9) You see, the Jews right from the start had resisted God’s plans for them. Joseph was one of the great types of Christ in the Old Testament, and as the Sanhedrin had rejected Jesus, so the patriarchs rejected Joseph, and for the same reason, envy. (Matt 27:18) My the Jews were running true to type. The sons of Jacob united to get rid of Joseph, the sons of Israel united to get rid of Jesus. The patriarchs resented Joseph because of his glorious goodness and Stephen did not to draw the obvious parallel. And their rejection of Joseph was followed by,

2. Their Reaction to Moses:

For Israel rejected Moses when he first tried to deliver them from Egyptian bondage, and he had to flee for his

life. Look at (7:25) But when Moses, like Joseph came to them the second time, they accepted him, and he set them free. My these two events illustrate how Israel treated the Lord Jesus. Israel rejected their Messiah when He came to them the first time, (Jn 1:11) but when He comes again, they will recognise and receive Him. (Zech 12:10 Rev 1:7) In spite of what they did to His Son, the Lord hath not cast His people. (Rom 11:1) My Israel today is suffering from a partial, spiritual blindness, that one day will be taken away. (Rom 11:25-32) Sure, individual Jews, are being saved, but the nation as a whole is blind to the truth about Jesus Christ. But notice Stephen continues as he talks of,

(c) ISRAEL AND THEIR SCRIPTURES:

For do you recall the third charge laid against Stephen ? They accused him of ***blaspheming the law.*** My again he pleads “ ***not guilty.***” He declares that God was the author of the law, angels were its mediator, and Moses was its recipient. That certainly was not blasphemy and well the Sanhedrin knew it. You see, the real truth was this, that down through the years Israel had repeatedly broken **that** law. Do you recall that the people had no sooner received the law when they broke it ? They said unto Aaron “ *make us gods to go before us, for as for this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt we know not what is become of him.*” (7:40) An after their settlement in the Promised Land they gradually adopted the gods of the pagan nations around them. The Lord repeatedly disciplined his people, and sent them prophets to warn them, until finally He carried them off to Babylon

where they were finally cured of idolatry. You see, its one thing to have the Word of God, but its another thing to heed the Word of God. Tell me, are you a doer of the Word ? Sure, we can carry the Word continually, we can mark the Word appropriately, we can thumb the Word piously, but fail to let it take root in our hearts. Do you recall what James says, “ *But be ye doers of the Word and not hearers only.*” (1:22) But look, Stephen continues with his defence and speaks of,

(d) ISRAEL AND THEIR SANCTUARIES:

Do you recall the fourth charge laid against Stephen ? “ *This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place.*” (6:13) “ ***Stephen, how do you plead ? Not guilty.***” Do you see what Stephen does here ? He traces the history of the Tabernacle, and then he traces the history of the Temple, and then he reminds the Sanhedrin that God does not dwell in temples made by men. (1 Kings 8:27 Is 66:1-2) Do you what the Jews were saying ? “ *God is surely with us, we have the Temple.*” But to think that the eternal, uncreated, self-existing God could be limited to one location was ludicrous. Do you remember what Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple ? “ *Will God indeed dwell on the earth ? behold the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee, how much less this house that I have builded.*” (1 Kings 8:27) Stephen was not guilty of blaspheming the temple. They were, for confining God to it.

Now can you imagine the tension that must have been

building throughout Stephen’s message ? As he pointed out Israel’s rejections, and apostasies, the Sanhedrin would have become increasingly uneasy. No doubt they wondered what point he intended to make. Their wait was over, for Stephen was about to thrust in the sword as he spoke about,

(e) ISRAEL AND THEIR SIN:

Look if you will at (7:51) Having laid the historic foundation, Stephen said, “ *You’re just like your fathers in the days of Joseph, Moses and David.*” My throughout the centuries, Israel refused to submit to God and obey the truths He had revealed to them. Their ears did not hear the truth, their hearts did not receive the truth, and their necks did not bow to the truth. As a result, they killed their own Messiah. They had accused Stephen of Reviling the Holy Place, he accused them of Resisting the Holy Spirit. They had accused Stephen of Slighting Moses the Man of God, he accused them of Slaying Jesus, the Messiah of God. They had accused him of Blaspheming the Law, he accused them of Breaking the Law.

My Stephen’s sermon was his death warrant, but he was standing tall. He had lived like Christ, and now he would die like Christ. For the Sanhedrin went berserk. Look at (7:54) My if the Defence of Stephen is valuable, then,

(2) THE DEATH OF STEPHEN

Is remarkable. Death reveals who we really are. Consider

the French philosopher Voltaire, who used to say concerning Christ, “ *Curse the wretch.*” He also boasted, “ *In twenty years Christianity will be no more. My single hand shall destroy the edifice it took twelve apostles to rear.*” Voltaire was proud, confident and cynical, but when he died, he cried in desperation, “ *I am abandoned by God and man. I give you half of what I am worth if you will give me six months life. Then I shall go to hell and you will go with me. O Christ. O Jesus Christ.*” By contrast the moment of death also reveals spiritual beauty. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, died full of counsel, exhortations and praise for the Lord. His final words were, “ *The best of all, God is with us.*” Adoniram Judson, the great American missionary to Burma, suffering immensely at death, said to those around, “ *I go with the gladness of a boy bounding away from school, I feel so strong in Christ.*” Jonathan Edwards, dying from smallpox, gave some final directions, bid his daughter good-bye and died saying, “ *where is Jesus my never-failing friend ?*” My Stephen’s death revealed him to be a man whose heart beat with Christ’s to the very last.

(a) For Stephen his Death meant CORONATION:

1. Circumstantially Stephen’s Death was Gruesome:

Fredrick Buechner describes it like this, “ stoning someone to death, even somebody as young and healthy as Stephen is not easy. You do not get the job done even with the first few rocks and broken bottles, and even after you get the man down, it is a long hot business. To prepare themselves for the workout, they stripped to the waist and

got someone to get an eye on their things till they were through. The man they got was fire-breathing young arch-conservative Jew named Saul, who was there because he thoroughly approved of what they were doing.” 1.

2. Spiritually Stephen’s Death was Glorious:

For he saw the Glory of God and the Son of God standing to receive him to heaven. (Lk 22:69) Elsewhere in the New Testament the Lord Jesus is described as being seated at the right hand of God. (2:34 Eph 1:20 Heb 1:3) Seated in terms of His redemptive work which is forever completed. But here Christ stands to His feet with arms wide open to welcome the first Christian martyr home. Beautiful. Do you see how Stephen describes Christ ? “ *Behold I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God.*” The title “ *Son of Man,*” refers to the Incarnation. (7:56) My our Saviour continues to bear the marks of Calvary in heaven. And Stephen himself a martyr recognised Christ’s wounded body. Stephen knew that Jesus Christ understood his pain, his misery, and his agony. He knew that the Saviour knew, cared and understood. Do you recognise that in the Glory there is a great High Priest that can be touched with your infirmities. The hymn writer put it like this,

***“ In every pang that rends the heart
The Man of Sorrows has a part
He sympathiseth in our grief
And to the sufferer sends relief.”***

(b) For Saul his Death meant SALVATION:

The death of Stephen for Saul eventually meant salvation. (7:58) You see, Saul never forgot that event. (22:17-21) Stephen's message, prayers and death were used by the Holy Spirit to prepare Saul for his own meeting with the Risen Lord. " *Stephen was it worth dying for Christ ?* " " *Saul was Stephen's death worth it ?* " What do you think Paul would say ? He would say " *it was the memory of Stephen's death that tormented me and refused to let me go.* " Was this not what the Risen Lord was referring to when He said to Saul on the Damascus Road, " *Saul, Saul It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.* " (9:5) You see, Stephen's death kept goading Saul of Tarsus, nudging him to the throne of grace. God never wastes the blood of his saints, " *for the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.* " (a) (b)

(c) For Israel his Death meant CONDEMNATION:

This was the nation's third murder. They had permitted John the Baptist to be killed. (Mk 6:27) They had asked for Christ to be killed (Lk 23:21) and now they were killing Stephen themselves. When they allowed Herod to kill John, the Jews sinned against God the Father who had sent John. (Matt 21:28-32) When they asked Pilate to crucify Jesus, they sinned against God the Son. (Matt 21:33-46) And when they stoned Stephen, Israel sinned against the Holy Spirit who was working in and through the apostles. (7:51 Matt 12:31-32) (c) And judgement finally came in 70 AD when Titus and the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. My

.... do you see that Stephen's death had far reaching implications ? (a) (b) (c) and,

(d) For the Church his Death meant LIBERATION:

Look if you will at (8:1) You see, they had been witnessing " *to the Jew first,* " ever since Pentecost, but now they were forced to take the message out of Jerusalem to the Samaritans (8:5) and even to the Gentiles (11:19) The opposition of the enemy prevented the church from becoming a Jewish " sect," and encouraged them to fulfil the commission that Christ laid down in (Ch 1) Do you know something ? God was in control, and He used the death of Stephen to spread the gospel abroad.

In the Spring of 1521, a Roman Catholic month and Professor of Theology was summoned to appear before Emperor Charles the fifth and the Imperial Diet of the Holy Roman Empire. For the previous few years Martin Luther had fearlessly criticised the abuses of the Roman church. His criticisms had fanned into flame the long smouldering resentments of the German people toward Rome. Determined to put an end to the popular uprising Luther had sparked, the young Emperor summoned him to Worms where the Diet would convene. There he would stand trial, and if convicted he faced execution. Luther's friend Spalatin warned him against going to Worms, although he had a safe pass from the Emperor. A century earlier, John Huss had been burned at the stake at the Council of Constance and he also had a safe pass.

In reply, Martin Luther wrote that he would enter Worms in spite of “ *the gates of hell and the powers of darkness, even if there were as many devils in it as there were tiles on the roofs of the houses.* ” He appeared before the Diet and he refused to recant what he had written. He would take back nothing, he asserted that his accusers could not prove him wrong from Scripture. He said,

“ Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason, (for I do not trust in the Pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves,) I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen.”

Luther stood solidly on the rock of Divine Revelation and changed the course of history. Stephen stood solidly on the rock of Divine Revelation and changed the course of history. My In a world that is ecumenically inclined will you stand here ? Will you stand for God, for Christ, for Truth, no matter what the cost ? Will you say with Luther, “ ***Here I stand I can do no other, God help me.*** ”