

# The Old-Time Evangelistic News

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Stephen: The Man who was Faithful to the End (Part 6)

Acts 6-7

Last month we concluded with a few thoughts showing that Stephen's application was *Disturbing*. As you read the reaction to Stephen's preaching, you cannot help but notice that the people were bothered by what they heard. In fact, as you read the messages throughout Acts, you will find that the people were always responding in one way or another. Some responded with acceptance; some responded in anger; but there was a reaction to what the men of God said. What made the difference? How could they preach and cause such a response? The answer is very simple, though very powerful. The reason they could preach with such power is that they were filled with the Holy Ghost. That is what Jesus said would happen in Acts 1:8—they would receive power after that the Holy Ghost came upon them. From Acts 2 until the end of the book, you find men (Peter, Stephen, Philip, Paul) preaching in the power of the Holy Ghost. That reality of being filled with the Holy Ghost is what caused the response among the people. It was not eloquence of speech or development of sermons (although using proper language or taking time to develop messages are not unimportant. To be honest, if you are filled with the Holy Ghost, I believe He will lead you to learn to speak your language well, and I know He will lead you to study His Word.), but it was the power of the Holy Ghost flowing through those men that brought about the reactions to their preaching.

We could go on with further examples in the book of Acts, but we must stay with Stephen's application. Notice the words used by Stephen that caused the people to be disturbed. These are not vulgar terms as some men have used in their "preaching" and have become well-known for doing so. Stephen is using plain, simple terms that

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these Jews would have recognized. He is trying to grab their attention, but he is also telling them their true condition. He is not beating around the bush, and he is not afraid to tell them exactly where they stand with God. The first word he uses is *stiffnecked*. It means "obstinate, stubborn, or headstrong." The word supplies a visual picture of what is in the heart. Stubbornness begins in the heart but is often very apparent in outward actions. You can see it displayed in children. Oftentimes, I have seen it in my own children. I will tell them to do something, and they will display their opposition and resistance to my command by stiffening their neck. They are being stubborn and rebellious against what they have been told. That display of stubbornness and rebellion in children is what all sinners display against God. Until that will is broken by the power of the Holy Ghost, the sinner remains lost. You cannot be saved until you surrender your will and your heart to the Lord. A rebellious, stubborn heart is in opposition to God. As long as you think that you are right and do not need any help, you are lost. No one in their natural state wants to hear that they are stiffnecked, but until the sinner is confronted with what they truly are, they will never be converted. Man in his sinful state is in rebellion against God. Man thinks that he is "good enough." That shows his stubbornness. Until he realizes by the convicting power of the Holy Ghost that he is not good in any way and is in rebellion against God, the sinner cannot be saved. He must be told, as Stephen told his audience, that he is stiffnecked against God and must humble himself before God.

The word stiffnecked is used several times in Exodus and Deuteronomy to describe the children of Israel. They had just been delivered from slavery in Egypt, so you think they would be humble and obedient to whatever God does. But instead, on several occasions, they rebel against God and his servant, Moses. In fact, most of the times that the word is used, it is God using it to describe the people of Israel. That is why Stephen uses it in this particular message. It has historic meaning to the people of Israel. He will go on to give specific examples of their rebellion against God, but he begins by using a general term to describe what is later displayed.

But what was true of Israel is true of all sinners. All sinners are stiffnecked and rebellious against God.

But Stephen does not stop with identifying the people as stiffnecked, he goes on to say that they are “*uncircumcised in heart and ears.*” Whether the people heard anything after “*uncircumcised*” is debatable. Stephen, in their minds, had uttered the biggest insult that one could say against a Jew. How dare he say that they were uncircumcised? Everyone of them had been circumcised on the eighth day after birth just as God, in Genesis 17, had told Abraham to do with all male children. All good Israelites circumcised their male children. They were Jews. They had been circumcised. Why would he say that?

But as the words following uncircumcised indicate, Stephen was not talking about their physical condition. He was using the words of Jeremiah and Ezekiel to describe their spiritual condition. In Jeremiah 6:10, Jeremiah says that he is preaching to a people whose “*ear is uncircumcised.*” Ezekiel, in describing the millennial temple, says that some have entered the sanctuary even though they are “*uncircumcised in heart.*” In both of these Old Testament passages, the prophet is focusing on the spiritual condition of the people, not on the physical condition. As God so often did in the Old Testament, and even in the New Testament, he was using a physical picture to describe a spiritual reality. Though circumcision was a physical act, it was to show how God would “cut away” the sin of the people. It did identify Israel as God’s chosen people, but they were supposed to be God’s people, not because of a physical act, but through their faith in God. Circumcision had become just a ritual that had lost any spiritual meaning. It had become a symbol of pride, and God, through Stephen, was trying to show them that.

Stephen said that they were “*uncircumcised in heart.*” This identified their spiritual condition. Outwardly they may be trying to please God, but inwardly their heart was wicked. Stephen is using what Ezekiel had written about in Ezekiel 36:26. There God

describes how he would replace Israel’s stony heart with a new heart of flesh. Again, a physical picture shows a spiritual reality. A sinner’s heart of stone that is rebellious and unreceptive must be broken by the Holy Spirit. When the sinner is broken through conviction, he then can receive a new heart. He can be born again. He can be saved. Stephen is telling these Jews that they are lost. Nationality does not matter. You are not good because you are a Jew. You are a sinner and must be saved.

He also declared that they were “*uncircumcised in ears.*” The Jews prided themselves on having the Word of God. They had “Moses and the prophets.” They had what no other people on the earth had and that made them special. The problem was that they were not listening to what God said in His Word. Their ears, spiritually speaking, were covered over. They needed to have that covering cut away, so they could hear what God was saying. Just having the Word of God was not enough. They needed to hear it and obey it.

Stephen’s message to the Jews of his day is applicable to most Americans today. There is a pride in many Americans that eliminates their need of salvation. Many are like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable. As the Pharisee compared himself to the publican and thought that he was all right, so the average American looks at the so-called heathen in other countries and says, “I am all right. I am not like the heathen in Africa or South America.” But they are not all right. Being an American may put you in good standing on this earth, but it means nothing in the sight of God. Being an American does not impress God one bit. You will not have a special place in heaven because you were born in America. You will not go to heaven just because you are born in America. You stand in the sight of God as lost as the worst heathen in whatever country you want to mention. Just like the Jews of Stephen’s day, you may be physically right, but you are spiritually wrong. The Jews had their lineage from Abraham, and you have your American citizenship, but neither will do you any good in eternity. It does not matter where you were born the first time

physically, but your second birth does matter. As Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:7, so I say to you, “*Ye must be born again.*” Again, nationality means nothing to God. You must trust in Jesus alone for salvation.

Stephen would add a third statement that would be disturbing. He said, “*Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost.*” The word resist means “to fall against; to be adverse; and to strive against.” It continues the idea of rebellion that he had begun with the first word stiffnecked. They now were refusing to respond to the leading of the Holy Ghost. Stephen may have had a special knowledge that you and I do not have today. The Holy Ghost may have let him know specifically that these men in particular were rejecting his convicting power. The Holy Ghost did do certain things in Acts through the apostles, Philip, and Stephen, that He does not do through us today. But I also think there is some truth in what Stephen said to these men that is applicable to all sinners who reject the clear teaching of Scripture. Stephen knew that he was filled with the Holy Ghost and preaching in the power of the Holy Ghost. He knew that he had declared the truth of Scripture in earlier messages and in the discussions mentioned in chapter 6. When confronted with the truth of Scripture, these men rejected it. In rejecting Scripture correctly preached, they resisted the Holy Ghost. A sinner today that rejects Scripture that is preached accurately is rejecting the Holy Ghost as well. May sinners be warned to submit to the Holy Ghost and not reject Him. We will continue next month.