



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Preaching the Word (Homiletics)

Lesson #4

B. Examples of New Testament Sermons

3. The Preaching of Two Deacons: Stephen and Philip (Acts 7-8)

In the days after Pentecost the teachers and preachers of the Christian congregation in Jerusalem were the twelve apostles. They also took care of the care of the poor and the sick. But when the number of Christians increased, they were not able to handle all of their duties. Therefore, the congregation chose seven helpers to assist them so that the apostles could concentrate on the ministry of the Word and prayer. Among these seven helpers or deacons, as they are usually called, were two men, Stephen and Philip, who had the gifts of teaching and explaining the Word of God.

In the book of Acts we have the sermon that Stephen preached when he was on trial before the Jewish council for allegedly speaking against Moses and the Temple. In this sermon Stephen recounted the history of the Jewish people from the time of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. He then discussed the days of Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon. He pointed out in particular what the Bible had to say about Moses and the temple.

After presenting this history and quoting pertinent passages from the Old Testament, Stephen addressed sharp words to those who accused him of blasphemy. **“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it”** (Acts 7: 51-53).

Since Stephen was addressing ungodly persons who had the blood of Jesus on their hands, he preached the law of God and His judgment. He used the history of the Jews and their past rejection of God’s prophets as the basis for his present accusations against them. Their fathers had received the law of God but had not kept it. They did not keep it even when Moses was still with them. When God sent His prophets, they had rejected them. And now the present generation was doing the same thing; they were rejecting the Messiah Himself whom the prophets had foretold.

There was no repentance on their part. In fact, they became so angry that they **“cast him out of the city and stoned him”** (Acts 7:58). Stephen was put to death for his preaching. He was the first of many martyrs who have died because they preached Jesus and His Word.

There are times today also when Christian preachers have to testify truthfully and bluntly against the enemies of Jesus Christ. They also may be beaten, fined, imprisoned, and even put to death for their testimony. At such times we need to be brave and steadfast like Stephen. We need to be willing to give our lives into death for Jesus’ sake. Stephen asked Jesus to take him home to heaven and he prayed that the Lord would forgive his attackers.

In Stephen’s sermon we have a good example of how to use Bible history in our sermons. The apostle Paul wrote, **“all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition”** (1 Corinthians 10:11). **“Whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope”** (Romans 15:4).

Philip was given a more pleasant task. When many Christians fled from Jerusalem because of severe persecution, some of them went to Samaria. **“Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them”** (Acts 8:5). Notice the subject matter of Philip’s preaching: He preached Christ. He no doubt centered his message on who Jesus was and what He had done for everyone by His life, death, and resurrection. The Samaritans did not reject Philip as the Jews in Jerusalem had rejected Stephen. **“The multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip”** (Acts 8:6). **“And there was great joy in that city”** (Acts 8:8). **“When they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized** (Acts 8:12).

The message of Stephen was rejected, but the message of Philip was accepted, and yet both of their messages exalted Christ. For this reason, Article V of the *Augsburg Confession* says: *“To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when He wills, in those who hear the gospel”* (Book of Concord, p. 40). The Holy Spirit produces faith where and when He wills. Both Stephen and Philip were faithful servants of Christ, but their outward success was different. The same things happens today when two preachers, faithfully preaching the same message of Christ, experience different results. The one who sees favorable results should not become proud, and the one with unfavorable results should not become discouraged. We are only witnesses; the Holy Spirit is the One who produces faith and the fruits of faith.

Philip was also given the pleasant task of explaining Scripture to a man from Ethiopia who was returning home after worshipping the God of the Jews in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit directed Philip to join this man as he was riding in his chariot. The man was reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He was reading about the lamb led to slaughter in chapter 53 of Isaiah’s prophecy and he could not understand who this lamb was. He invited Philip to sit with him and help him understand what he was reading. **“Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him”** (Acts 8:35). Jesus is the Lamb of God that Isaiah was writing about in advance. Jesus was the Lamb of God on whom God laid the sin of the world, so that sinners like us could be forgiven. As Philip had preached Jesus Christ to the multitudes in Samaria, so he preached Jesus Christ to the solitary man riding in his chariot. The Holy Spirit can do His work in crowds and one-on-one. The important thing is that we open our mouths and proclaim Jesus.

Questions

1. Why were seven men chosen to help the apostles in Jerusalem?
2. Which two of these seven became preachers of the Word?
3. Why did Stephen’s listeners become so angry with him?
4. How did Stephen make use of the Old Testament in his preaching?
5. What is Christian martyrdom?
6. What was the subject matter of Philip’s preaching in Samaria?
7. Why did Philip’s preaching have a different result from Stephen’s?
8. How was Philip able to help the man traveling to Ethiopia?
9. What was the central point in Philip’s preaching in Samaria and on the road to Ethiopia?

Read Acts 13:14-52