

“A Man of Faith And the Power of the Indwelling Christ”

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Sermon for 25 June 2023

Texts: Gal. 2:20; Acts 6:8-10 and 7:54-60

By faith the transmissibility of divine power is activated. That is what people witnessed through Stephen’s life: divine was in him, on him and through him. That’s the difficult thing. Secondly, the evidence of miraculous working power through Stephen (operations of faith!) such as we have recorded in Acts 6 & 7 appears to be **normative**, and not exceptional, for that period of time. It is true that Stephen was **prayed over, had hands laid on him by the apostles after being identified as being full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom—all seven were!— which suggests that Philip was like Stephen in aptitude and in performance.** And all by the power of the indwelling Christ in the man of faith! Again, all this is *normative* for that moment in early church history rather than exceptional. That Stephen’s moment is not our moment does not mean that divine power is inoperative in our day—even if we do not regularly experience its manifestations(!). The disparity is irrelevant because the record remains in the Word that these things were signs of the Kingdom’s rule in the midst of our brokenness. Much of the wreckage in our lives and in the lives of contemporaries is attributable to broken trust.

Broken trust also featured in the fall of man—catapulting ingratitude and mistrust into the Garden of Eden. Satan, our bitterest spiritual foe lobbied those incendiary devices into human history out of bitterness, envy, spite, malice and implacable hatred for God and His creatures. Hostility and suspicions had no place prior to being planted there to wreak ruin and destruction and death! Satan’s attack and his seductions continue ruthlessly—we are under demonic siege and we know who heads it up. The remedy for this catastrophe is the redeeming mission of the Son and our relentless trust in response. By His sovereign and un-breach-able faithfulness God has shown Himself impeccably trustworthy—our challenge is: will we choose to trust entirely again? Our trust needs to be as relentless as our Enemy’s assault! We must choose to actually trust God; we must allow love to prevail.

Broken trust incubates faithlessness and spawns unbelief. That is why we need the records, the receipts as we now say, of divine activity, divine power operative in men of faith such as Stephen to strengthen, encourage and inspire us. Church splits, divorces, broken families and the multifold betrayals and abusive behaviors are symptomatic of that brokenness. What we do in the face of all that matters eternally.

20 I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and (in so far as) the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

And, furthermore, divinely equipped men such as these were appointed to the **daily distribution of food.** Men with credentials and a track record would be harder to quibble with or to quarrel with—for which cause the apostles sought them to be selected! The implication, to me, seems to be that there was a rather large pool of

candidates as God provided leadership for the **murmuring Hellenists and Hebrew Christians**—ethnic differences and hostility did not miraculously go away. Interesting. We are told at this time that there was great accord, and everyone was of one mind and sharing corporately! Conflict and peace co-existed.

As I opened up my study notes this morning, I was struck by how differently they read from when I first copied them! I discovered reductionism and utilitarianism had infiltrated the thinking—as exposed in the writing of Steven Coles. (He is a contemporary commentator whom I consult from time to time.)

- By *reductionism* I mean the insistence that miracles be restricted *historically* to Apostolic times—whereas the truth is that God can perform miracles anytime He chooses. When this is asserted under the guise of “setting the context,” we must avoid being misled into thinking that the time of occurrence limits other occurrences at other times and places *or negates the possibility of other suitable observations!*
- By *utilitarianism* I mean arguing that these miracles were performed to establish the apostolic authority, or confirm the testimony of the Apostles—and here we note that miracles affirming the reality of the Kingdom presence on earth; or expressing the sheer love of God for His creatures and Jesus’ love for the lost sheep in Israel are just as relevant motives as apostolic legitimization!. Indeed God working miracles out of love for us is timeless, and unlimited to the history of the early church!

And I was struck by how I missed those subtle influences, or nuances when I first read his commentary. Re-reading is most advisable! Amazing what exposure does. Here, too, is the best reason for studying (*and reviewing*) both ancient and contemporary sources—the former are pre-reductionist and pre-utilitarian and the latter (contemporary sources) are so entangled with those philosophical streams that one has to identify and filter them out. Here is an example. Coles writes “God can do miracles any time He pleases and we should not limit Him by our restrictive theology or little faith. But the biblical evidence [whatever does that mean?!] is that (the) gift of performing miracles was limited to **this transitional period** for the purpose of confirming the testimony of the apostles¹ (Heb. 2:3-4; 2 Cor. 12:12).” That assertion is restrictive and reductionistic. 1. It contradicts “God can do miracles any time he pleases;” 2. The testimony here is more properly, and primarily, attached to Stephen and not to the apostles!; 3. Miracles were assuredly a [testimony to the power and efficacy of the name of Jesus]; 4. “Limited to” and “not limited” do not align!; 5. This line of reasoning is utilitarian (“confirming the testimony of the apostles”) whereas **confirming the power of Jesus’ name** and expressing the love of God for His creatures, for mankind are more perennial purposes! Jesus called, trained and appointed the apostles, **giving them authority to perform the miraculous in His name as sign of the Kingdom’s arrival/presence.** Besides there are other periods of Biblical time when God appears to have been performing miracles (Moses and the ten plagues comes to mind immediately—as well as daily provision through the

¹ What is that but the gospel of Jesus Christ?

wilderness wanderings) regularly. Then we have Elijah and Elisha to take into consideration. Unless we limit the “evidence” to the moment in time that Stephen is persecuted and slain, it is unreasonable to assert this limitation. “Confirming the testimony of the apostles” is a reductionistic limitation.

And what about the glow, ***the radiance***, of those who are close to God and, after being in His presence, reflect somewhat of His glory? Moses’ face? Jesus’ face on the Mountain of Transfiguration?

6 For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Yes, God is light and light was created as the first act of creation, calling into being supernatural light! The blinding effect of Moses’ face on others, or of Jesus’ appearing to Saul on the Damascus Road ***are certainly about radiance*** and not just a “serene calmness.” This is another example of reductionist description. (The critic is saying, “Let’s just skip the radiance bit and treat this affect as a personality trait!”) Calmness in the face of imminent danger, and the threat of death—like Daniel facing the lions’ den, or his three friends facing the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar—characterized many of the many martyrs but radiance is another matter. Stephen appears to have **the face of an angel**. ***It was the power of God indwelling him through faith and shining, or radiating out from him—love, joy, peace and power.***

We are also told of Stephen and of Philip that they were powerful preachers of the word. That their words confounded, even silenced, some of their enemies and detractors. **And they** (members of the Freedman from Africa and Cilicia where Paul was from) **were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.** (Acts 6:10) The food fights of Acts 6:1 have apparently morphed into the party strife and disputes of Acts 6:9. Does this seem recognizable—strong opinions, dissent and controversy . . . all native to the church, a legacy of challenging ferment?

At this point one of the ladies in jail church might ask, “So what is this faith?” We will get to that I assure you.

20 I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and (in so far as) the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

“These words form the center and nucleus,” according to A. MacLaren, “of the whole Christian life.” First there is ***the motive of pure and perfect love of the Son*** for lost sinners. *We could expand on the primacy of that love, the priority of that love and power of that love!* The Lord bound Himself to the cross with “cords of love and the bands of man” **He loved and gave Himself up for me.** Secondly, **for me** signifies a sacrifice made for men and instead of us! He took our place, bearing the due penalty of our sins! That is the plain meaning of **God so loved the world.**

Thirdly, there is a wonderful sense that while this sacrifice was for mankind, it was also personally for me individually. Christ died for all and He died for each. This removes all vagueness and anonymity. **Anonymity is regressive, I think, because there is nothing impersonal about redemption! Nothing!!** He died for all of us, extending God's redeeming love to each of us! And that what is forgiven is the individual and particular sin of each and every person. Nothing too foul, or too heinous to be forgiven . . . for the blood cleanses all and it does so entirely. There is power in the blood! This is the central fact. Our trust, that is, becoming as His little children, delights and pleases God the Father and moves Him to engage more personally with us!

I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. What is faith? **To explain "faith," let's employ the word "trust."** A word more familiar to life as we live it. Hopefully, we experience trust between husband and wife, friend, parent and child and can transfer this *trust* to Jesus and that trust, glorified in the act of transfer, becomes the seed of immortal life—something that opens the gate of heaven to us. Paul learned to trust Jesus Christ with everything for everything and in everything. Trusting Jesus is the bridge that allows us to transfer the blessings of the gospel from one side of the garden across the river; or, to convey truth into our own daily life and thus, by faith, world-wide truth becomes our truth. God does not love the masses but loves each, bears the load of each man's sins for each man that being the weight of sin that Jesus bore. The sin of each man distinguished and embraced.

Our faith, modeled along apostolic lines, unfolding, or tracking in all three aspects: Christ's pure love, a sacrifice and redemption's universal scope (reaching each and all). Remember the Person of Whom we speak, the Son of God(!) and that it is all of Him to which we should cling! The partial grasp of one, only partially divine will not suffice and that extends to the efficacy of His work. Such saving faith is personal—it appropriates the complete purpose and all the benefits of Christ's sacrifice. *It is lazy of us to simply assent to this as general truth generally.* Yes, speaking in generalities is superficially easy, **but profitless.** It is useless for a man to declare "All men are mortal" when the point to be made is, "I have to die." That penetrates, confronts and sticks whereas the former is vapid, mere talk. If we apply that to "all men are sinners," and fail to arrive at personal self-realization, we will never get down to the apt, personal repentance business at hand. The latter view, or sideways glance will not call out, or terrify—only "I am a lost, helpless and hopeless sinner" brings us to our knees infant of the throne of grace. General judgment is nowhere near as alarming as judgment personalized and particular! **Only a sincere confession of my need for forgiveness prompts prayers for pardon and purification.**

Therefore, while it is fine for us to sing : "Christ for the world," what we must actually take away is this: **Christ loved and died for me . . . He gave Himself for my deliverance, my redemption.** We are not merely, nor "bare" sinners, we are ***oppressed and need liberation***; we are ***enslaved and need ransom***. Unless we personally take possession of Christ's benefits we have not entered, and we do not know the blessedness of the Christian life. We are at the beach but not in the water! A whole river may flow past my farm but unless I bring it into my fields by ditch, or

pipe or bucket, its waters are of no benefit to me! My sluices, my pipes, my buckets—my investment, my labor and work make the river useful; or its water beneficial.

Faith is something we have a right, need and obligation to exercise. Christ loves each is where to start on our way to Christ so loves the world. The process occurs in the mind of God as well as in the mind of those to whom it is revealed. We are right to draw the inference that Christ loves each of those He loves—**whosoever believeth on Him is saved** is merely a filler for your own name as we move from generality to specificity. To live otherwise is profitless, waterless, useless. Oh, that my people would think and believe!

The life we live, I think, as Christians is “dual” in nature. We live it out both in the flesh and we live it in faith—it is life in both all at once. We have great trailing sprays of seaweed, floating as a gold, brown and rusty banner in the stirred waters—on one end secured securely to a rock (faith) and on the other it is all dance and waving (flesh). Its roots are its stay in foul or fair weather—its anchor is quite immovable! So am I living in the flood of changing mutabilities but tied deep down, in the center of all things in Christ Jesus my Lord. So whether I look up to the throne, or peer down into the deep, it is the Lord to whom I am by faith connected—He is my anchor and stay—both ways. In that I find motive, pattern, power for noble service and all things holy!

Like a river glorious is God's perfect peace,
Over all victorious, in its bright increase;
Perfect, yet it floweth fuller every day,
Perfect, yet it groweth deeper all the way.
Refrain:
Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest
Finding, as He promised, perfect peace and rest.

Hidden in the hollow of His blessed hand,
Never foe can follow, never traitor stand;
Not a surge of worry, not a shade of care,
Not a blast of hurry touch the spirit there.
Refrain:
Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest
Finding, as He promised, perfect peace and rest.

Every joy or trial falleth from above,
Traced upon our dial by the Sun of Love;
We may trust Him fully all for us to do.

I am just old enough to remember crankable car engines—on Model A Fords!—and I remember the work it took and the care one needed to exercise to start an engine and not break your forearm! Perhaps this will serve as an illustration of what it is like to move our lives into holiness, beauty, love, power and nobleness if we are self-starters. The installation of a starter is rather like converting to steam—faster than gear worms and stronger than torque! Inviting the Holy Spirit in is **admitting Christ in His fullness of power!**

This is not self-help! It is not lifting yourselves up by your bootstraps. *This is redemption, pure and simple: Christ in me, the hope of glory!*

See how He **activates the heart and soul through faith**—not success. Victory and triumph make their presence known and all the silence and stillness and inactivity comes to an abrupt end! Then movement seems effortless as the running engine moves all things forward. *Truly automobile, truly spiritual, truly alive in Him.*

It's an analogy, of course. But as MacLaren wrote: "The life I live in the flesh is poor, limited, tortured with anxiety, weighed upon by sore distress, becomes dark and gray and dreary often as we travel nearer the end, and is always full of miseries and of pains. But if within that life in the flesh, **there be a life of faith**, which is the life of Christ Himself! It is brought to us *through our faith*, and that life will be triumphant, quiet, patient, aspiring, noble, hopeful, gentle, strong, God-like, being the life of Christ Himself within us." Pray for wisdom and for the Holy Spirit.

Test your faith by two things: what it grasps and what it does. If it grasps the whole Christ, in all the glory and blessedness of His nature and work, then it is a genuine (and useful) faith, Secondly, test its genuineness by how it animates all your actions through divine love—Imparted and empowering love. Thereby creating a sense of conscious presence of our Lord—He is the pattern, law, motive, goal, companion, redeemer and reward: **to me to live is Christ. Idled cars only do nothing but park well— whether they be stopped, or stalled.**

But if the engine is started and the gears are engaged, that vehicle is going somewhere.

Amen