



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The First Sunday After Christmas, being the Commemoration of
the Feast of St. Stephen, December 30th, 2012

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Today is our Patronal Festival – the Sunday upon which we commemorate St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, the saint in whose honor our church is named.

Stephen was a man of singular courage. He had the courage to stand up to the civil authorities to proclaim the Christian Gospel. More to the point, he also had the courage to explain to the members of his own Christian community that they were failing to live up to the full teachings of Christ's Gospel.

The Christian Church -- two or three years after the Resurrection – operated as an exclusively Jewish sect. Stephen put an end to the exclusiveness. He delivered the decidedly unpopular message that Gospel of Jesus Christ was for all mankind -- Jew and Gentile, without distinction; that the old Covenant had been superseded by the New.

It took more than a dozen years for the Christian Church in Jerusalem to accept the full implications of the fact that Jesus Christ's promise of salvation was addressed to every man, woman and child, Jew and Gentile, bond and free.

The fact that Stephen recognized the full implications of Christ's Gospel so many years ahead of most of his fellow Christians marks him not only as a man of enormous courage, but

also a man of extraordinary insight and integrity. That his brothers and sisters in the Faith recognized his shining integrity and moral courage is demonstrated by the role assigned him in the leadership of Jerusalem's Christian Community. Stephen, the Acts of the Apostles tells us, was one of seven men selected to try to resolve a petty factional quarrel over charitable relief.

The new deacons swiftly settled the dispute and Luke reports that soon after their appointment the Church began to expand rapidly, in large part, inspired by the power of Stephen's preaching and the miracles of healing that he performed.

The Christian community's enemies moved swiftly to silence Stephen by suborning witnesses to accuse him of blasphemy. In choosing the word "suborn," Luke seems to be implying that some of these witnesses were renegade Christians. Nor should this be entirely surprising -- because Stephen didn't shy away from telling his fellow Christians things that they didn't want to hear.

The Jews believed they were God's Chosen People because of the merits inherited from Abraham and the Patriarchs. This special status gave them precedence over the other peoples of the world. But in fact, their status as the Chosen People obliged them to live their individual and

corporate lives in such a manner that they would be a witness and a testimony to the Lord God -- to be a living sermon, so to speak, to all the nations upon earth..

They were, corporately, to be the means by which the light would be spread to lighten the Gentiles. Jesus Christ took His message first to the Jews in order that they should honor their obligation to act as God's instrument and spread the Gospel throughout the world -- enlightening not only their fellow Jews of the diaspora, but the Gentiles as well.

It was the culmination of their role as Chosen People. It was also an eminently practical arrangement. After all, who could have been better suited to preach the New Covenant than those who had already been living under the old one. And it's well for us to note how splendidly the Jews succeeded in this awesome venture. It was first and foremost Jewish Christian who took Christ's Gospel to all corners of the known world. And the spark that created the blaze that set the world afire was Stephen's preaching was that spark.

We can get a very good idea of his message from the defense speech he delivered during his trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council of state. Stephen was facing the death sentence. Blasphemy was a capital offense. Even so, he didn't pull a punch. Stephen delivered the message that it was wrong for the religious leadership to try to exercise a monopoly on the worship of God in Jerusalem; and -- by clear implication -- that it was equally wrong for Christians to restrict Christ's Gospel to Jews.

This left Stephen's prosecutors speechless. Instead of trying to answer Stephen, they howled him down, but he refused to be silenced. During a lull in the tumult, he proclaimed the divinity of Christ, echoing the prophecies of Daniel: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God." That was the final straw. His accusers, now a howling mob, dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death.

But Stephen's courage had not been in vain. Within weeks of his death, the church's mission to the Gentiles had started in earnest. Shortly after Stephen's martyrdom, his fellow deacon, Philip, departed for Samaria to preach the Gospel to the Samaritans, the people most bitterly hated by the Jews of those days, baptizing the first Gentiles, including a Eunuch from the royal court of Ethiopia.

Within weeks, a ringleader of the mob that had stoned Stephen to death -- Saul of Tarsus, the man who guarded the coats of his murderers and led the persecution of Christians that followed the lynching -- had been miraculously converted to the new Faith. Saul the persecutor, became Paul the Apostle; the man who, more than any other, was to be responsible for spreading the Gospel of Christ throughout the world.

Within weeks, the indecisive St. Peter had seen a vision on the roof of the house of Joppa in which he was told: "What God hath cleansed call not thou common." It led him to baptize the entire Gentile household, of the Roman centurion Cornelius.

The person directly responsible for all this -- the overthrow of a thousand years of cultural conditioning -- was Stephen. And while a solitary saint probably seems a remarkably feeble weapon to pit against a thousand years of social convention, we should bear in mind that the Book of Acts tells us Stephen was "full of faith and power and the Holy Spirit."

Working through St. Stephen, the Holy Spirit moved the Christian Church to free itself from the bonds of cultural convention and to return to following the will of God. And if the Holy Spirit could accomplish that 2,000 years ago, it can still do the same thing today. AMEN

**To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be
Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power,
Both Now and Forever. Amen.**