"ACCORDING TO CHRIST" - Part 4

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Editorial Four

In concluding this brief series of editorials, for the time being, we are going to sum up this matter of the Church and the churches by looking more seriously at the great crisis or turning point which we have in the New Testament.

From what we can discern in the relevant literature, it would seem that very few indeed - and some of these only indistinctly - have recognised the tremendous nature of the events centring around Stephen (Acts 6, 7). A more careful consideration of Acts 7 in the light of the whole context of the New Testament will lead to some very deep and far-reaching conclusions.

In the first place, through Stephen there is given retrospective confirmation and explanation of some of the most momentous and critical things said by the Lord Himself in the days of His flesh. Too little account has been taken of those intimations or declarations of His that with Him and resultant from Him an entirely new economy and different order was imminent.

In the second place, with Stephen there was the forcefulness of Heaven breaking in with two mighty meanings. One, shock-treatment to the Church, which, with its first leaders, was settling down to a semi-Judaistic Christianity, with the Temple, synagogues, and Jerusalem as an accepted system. The other, the Divine foreknowledge and prediction that in the approximate period of forty years (a significant period) the whole of that centralized and crystallized order would be shattered, and scattered like the fragments of a smashed vessel over the earth, never again to be reconstituted in the dispensation.

Stephen, in his inspired pronouncement, did some devastating things. He first traced the Divine movement from Abraham, along a SPIRITUAL line (back of all temporal and material instrumentalities), to Christ, showing that what was in the Divine mind throughout was a spiritual and heavenly system and order, culminating in Jesus, the Christ. He next showed that historically the people concerned had failed to recognise that spiritual meaning, that heavenly concept, and had done two things. They had made the earthly and temporal an end in itself, and given fullness and finality to it. Then they had persecuted, cast out, or killed those who, seeking to make the spiritual and heavenly paramount, had rebuked their shortsightedness and condemned their unspirituality. According to Stephen this was a vicious and evil force that was at work even when the symbols and types of the heavenly were being FORMALLY and ritualistically practised.

The effect of Stephen's pronouncement, and the significance of his anointing with the Holy Spirit - as will be seen from some of his clauses - was to wipe out and set aside the entire Old Testament order, as represented by and centred in the Temple at Jerusalem. The significance of the advent of Christ was the displacing of what was - and is - of time, by that which is eternal; the displacing of that which is of earth by that which is of Heaven; the displacing of the temporal by the spiritual; and the displacing of the MERELY local by the universal. The cult of Israel was finished for the age.

One, perhaps supreme, factor in the significance of Stephen was what he saw at the end and said with almost his last breath: "Behold, I see the heavens opened; and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" (7:56). Here we have, the central and basic reality of true New Testament Christianity, of the Church and the churches - Jesus on the right hand of God. The government, the authority, the headquarters, vested in the ascended Lord, and centred IN HEAVEN; not in Jerusalem, nor anywhere else on earth. Then, this is the only occasion on which, after Jesus Himself had used the title, He is spoken of as Son of Man. This is NOT the Jewish title, it is the universal designation. In Daniel we have the Son of Man as receiving from God "dominion, and glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him" (Dan. 7:14). That is the meaning of Stephen's vision and utterance.

The Jewish rulers and Stephen's accusers were quick and shrewd enough to recognise the implications, for they had no less and no other import than that the 'Temple made with hands' was finished; the dispensation of the Law was ended. There was an implicit call to the Church of Jesus to leave the Temple and all that went with it and to move into the greater, the fuller, and the abiding reality. What startling and impressive significance this gives to two other things immediately related. As we see these, we are forced to exclaim: 'Oh, wonderful!'

The first is that Paul comes right into the picture at this very point. Was Stephen God's vessel for this great heavenly revelation? Was he the spearhead of the heavenly movement? Was he the voice of Heaven, proclaiming, in a crucial and dangerous hour in the Church's history, the true and eternal nature of its constitution and vocation? Did they do him to death, driven by the sinister intelligence of the evil powers who know the incalculable importance of a Church on HEAVENLY ground? Very well then, Heaven answers, and in the hour of Hell's vicious and destructive onrush, brings into immediate view the man who will impart for all time the revelation in fullness of those realities inherent in Stephen's brief ministry. What an answer! What an example of the Son of Man being at the Throne! The same forces of destruction will pursue Paul for his life, but that Throne will see the revelation given in fullness, and destruction suspended until the work is done.

The second impressive thing is that the very work of evil, intended to curtail and end this essential development, was made the very means of effecting it. The Church universal, and its representation worldwide, took its rise from that very hour and event. Peter and James may remain in Jerusalem, and some die-hard legalists may circle around the latter at least; but God is moving on, and they will have either to fall in or be left in limitation.

Now all this, with its tremendously searching implications, has much to say to Christianity today.

Because of the close likeness, both of Stephen's position and of his interpretation of the times, to the Letter to the Hebrews, some have attributed that letter to him. There is no value here in pursuing the matter into the realm of authorship or textual criticism, but the identity of position in both is impossible to mistake. Indeed, 'Hebrews' could very rightly be regarded as Stephen's (or, for that matter, Paul's) full presentation of the crisis and change of dispensations.

The tragedy is that, with 'Hebrews' in their hands, responsible leaders of the Church can still adhere to a system and form which is but the extension or carry-over of the Old Testament, with certain changes of phraseology. The IMMENSITY of the change and gap has certainly not been apprehended. Some of the most terrible things in the whole Bible are contained in that letter in relation to the crisis and the two ways and realms. The issue is no less than that of life and death.

All this has much to say regarding the true nature of the Church and the churches. He that hath eyes to see, let him see!