

The Church's One Foundation

Acts 7:55-60

A sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

Several weeks ago we looked the problem of being a second generation disciple. We learned that we're all second generation Christians. We are tempted to think if we had only been there and had a visual, hands-on experience, then we would believe. But that wasn't true for them or us. Even for them there was no private miracle because it is always by faith in him.

We have often looked at the history of the church and realized we can't stand on the claim that "history proves" Christianity is right. The history of the church does not do that. It doesn't work for the history of our lives, too, when we face what life has really been.

Today we come to Stephen, who is featured in Acts 7 and 8. He is the first deacon, the first leader, the first martyr. The lectionary leaves out his speech (50 verses long!) before the Council (the Sanhedrin) where he is being tried.

We can summarize the three main points of his speech recalling how they have fallen away and gone astray.

First of all, they were the people of God, the children of God through Abraham, the covenant. But they still fell into idolatry.

Second, they received the law and the festivals and how to live and the prophets who helped them understand this. But the prophets were killed and the sacrifices were often made to false gods.

Third, they were given a land and a temple but the land was lost and the temple destroyed because they had fallen into idolatry.

About sixty years earlier Herod the Great had built the temple again. They rejoiced and thanked him. It was a magnificent building as far as we can tell. They then understood that the Lord was going to restore the kingdom and the land. Here came Stephen quoting Isaiah 67:1-2: "The Lord is not bound to a temple made with hands." This is all just before where he says to them: "You stiff-necked people!" (Acts 7:51). And they are shocked because they are the good people. The judges, the upright, the leaders, those who have kept the law. They became enraged, gnashed their teeth, and as a mob rushed Stephen and stoned him to death, which

was illegal according to Roman law. But they just did it. And Saul was there consenting to what was happening.

In one sense what Stephen said was old hat, that is, bringing out the idea that you think you can hold on to the fact that you are descendants of Abraham. In Matthew 3:9 John the Baptist says to the Pharisees and Sadducees: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."

In John 8:3 again the people say: "We are descendants of Abraham . . .," and therefore we are the chosen.

The same is true about the law and the festivals. This is particularly seen in Matthew 5 to 7, and 23, where the law and the festivals are criticized and changed. This is evident also in John 4:21-23 about the woman at the well, where Jesus says worship is not about worshipping on Mount Gerizim or at the Temple in Jerusalem. Worship has changed: "True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23).

What is ironic is that in fifty years Jerusalem, including the Temple, were laid waste by the Romans. At that point Judaism changed to being centered in the synagogue, which is something very different from being focused on the Temple.

This text in Acts is reflecting on what was said in Jeremiah 7:4: "Do not trust these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'" Then it goes on in Jeremiah 7:11: "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?"

Recall the cleansing of the temple in John 2:19, where Jesus says: "'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.'" That is echoed in Acts 6:13-14 where it is said of Stephen: "'This man never ceases to speak words against the holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us.'"

What is at stake is having these kinds of institutions, ceremonies, laws, and festivals that one can hang onto. This is security. In Hebrews the pilgrim people of God are wandering through this earth as the Jews did for forty years.

This brings us to the church. What is the church? Why is it? Which is it?

First, what is the church?

In church history there are three major options:

The first option is the Roman Catholic Church. If one wants security, it is the biggest and has been around for a long time.

The second option is: Churches with a chain of Tradition going back to the earliest years. After all, the Eastern Orthodox Church is just as old as the Roman Catholic Church. The Anglican tradition also has chain of bishops from one generation to the next going back to the early church. Then one has a certain something to hang on to.

In the third option, the congregation is what you can depend on. Among Lutherans it was Sverdrup who said: The congregation is that which gives you authority. This view is also found in the Congregational and Baptist traditions.

In a fascinating study done by the Roman Catholic scholar Jerome Quinn, he concludes that it is impossible to establish any particular way the church should be structured by arguing from the New Testament (*Eucharist and Ministry. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 4* [1970] 69-100). Of course people make such claims anyway. But as soon as you look at the whole, you find it cannot be done.

In the second place, the history of the church is history of a mixed sort. As Karl Barth said: The only real proof for the existence of God is the that church continues in spite of the way it acts. There's a hymn verse that goes: "Like a mighty army moves the church of God." The proper thing to do at the end of that line is laugh. The church collapses. It's full of trouble. It's not a mighty army at all.

We recall that in 313 A.D. Constantine issued *The Edict of Toleration* and the church started to become official. In the last fifty years scholars have debated whether this was a blessing or a curse because the church became part of the establishment. The first actual pope, Damasus the First, died in 384. When Rome fell, first in 410 and again in 476, there was a vacuum and the structure of the Roman Empire continued in the Roman Catholic Church, also a kind of empire that has continued up to the present day.

In 1054 the Church split. The Eastern Church broke off. In 1517 Rome had to face the 95 Theses on the door of the Church at Wittenberg. In 1545, just before his death, Luther wrote a tract on the Roman Church as the Anti-Christ.

Luther also talked about the universal Councils of the church and said: "Councils, too, can err" (___). We hold to Councils and Creeds not because they are acts of the

universal church but because they are statements of the Gospel. That is the controlling factor.

We will always have structures of some sort because we are social beings. Not only is the basic unit of life the family, but we are individuals in groups who need groups of all sorts, including nations. It is unavoidable. The Quakers said they were going to avoid all organizations and all ceremonies, and then they ended up with their own organization and their own ceremonies. It is the way we are made.

For Lutheranism Melancthon wrote a footnote to the Smalcald Articles (paraphrase): "We can have any structure for the church, as long as it is not required" (Smalcald 15; Tappert 316-17). As long as it is not said: "This is the way it has to be because of the New Testament or because some other requirement makes it that way."

The only question we ask is: "What is useful for proclaiming the Gospel?" What works for mission? Church structures may be of various kinds and have been, but Melancthon's footnote is the test, the measure.

We Lutherans have a famous text in the Augsburg Confession, Article 7: "It is sufficient for the unity of the church that the Gospel be preached purely and the sacraments celebrated according to that Gospel."

Lutherans are the most ecumenical of all. The problem comes when people say: "Yes, Plus you have to do certain works, or Plus you have to have a certain structure, or Plus you have to have a conversion experience, etc." Then of course the Gospel is lost.

Matthew 18:20 states: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." The key is "in my name." John 14:13-14 states: "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it." It is always about the Gospel. His name means: "the name of Jesus Christ who died and rose again." That is what it's about. All these other things which are added become crutches and idols.

In the cartoon *Peanuts* Linus always has his blanket. He hangs on to it. If it's taken away, he's under terrible distress. What happens to us is that we have our private Linus blankets. Of course the Gospel, but I want more, a certain feeling, a certain private miracle, or a certain structure that I can hang onto.

In 1 Cor 3:1-2 Paul writes: "I first addressed you as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready." In other words, grow up! This is a matter of serious concern: Proclaiming the Gospel.

As John 14:27 states: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you." That is true of all of what we are about. He gives us his presence and reality, not as security of an external sort, but as security in him. For this reason we make a distinction between "security" and "certainty." The whole point is that certainty is in him. We have freedom. Not as the world gives but freedom because we are in him.

The Gospel does not foster securities outside of him because certainty is outside of us, in spite of us; it is in the cross. The cross is really an anti-miracle. It changes everything. Amen.