

July 21, 2013
Church Planting

False Testimony
Acts 6:8-15

Opening words: This summer we are looking at the first eight chapters of the Book of Acts. I have called this sermon series, *Church Planting*. So much has happened to this point. The Holy Spirit was unleashed on the world and the church was created. Lives were being changed. The disciples were transformed into apostles, who began to flex their spiritual muscles. Under their leadership, individuals were healed and thousands were experiencing the power of the resurrected Jesus. Last week we learned the church had grown beyond Palestine. This growth caused a tension within the church, which had to be dealt with wisely. This week the story continues.

Today, the spotlight is shining squarely on one of the early converts, Stephen. He is respected by the entire body and seems to have a bright future. The problem is, he never had the opportunity to reach his full potential. The majority of his life is behind him. In the weeks to come, we are told he would become the first Christian martyr. His problems begin today. The leaders of the orthodox faith singled him out. His witness was so powerful he was arrested and put on trial. It is his trial we look at today. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Acts 6:8-15. Let me call this message *False Testimony*.

Acts 6:8-15 ⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Unless you have been living in a cave the past few months, you know the name George Zimmerman. You know his story and you have been overexposed to his trial. On February 26, 2012, Zimmerman noticed a seventeen year old, Trayvon Martin, in his gated community. Being the coordinator of his neighborhood block watch, he kept an

eye on the boy. Before the night was over, the two fought. The fight ended when a gun went off. Martin was dead and Zimmerman, in time, was charged with murder. Zimmerman said he was attacked; Martin's supporters said he was a victim of racial profiling. Zimmerman's trial began on June 10, 2013. It ended on July 13, when a jury of six women decided he was innocent. Our country is still wrestling with their decision. How do you feel about the George Zimmerman trial? Everyone seems to have an opinion. Do you think he is innocent? Or do you think they let a guilty man go free? Can I ask you a question?

Why do trials grab the attention of so many people? It is not just in America. It is true in every corner of the world. History is dotted with famous trials. Just think about it for a minute. There have been so many famous trials in history. Let me just mention a few.

1. The Trial of Socrates (399 BC)
2. The Trial of Galileo (1633)
3. The Salem Witch Trials (1692)
4. The Mutiny on the Bounty Trial (1792)
5. The Trial of John Brown (1859)
6. The Trial of Lizzy Borden (1893)
7. The Black Sox Trial (1921)
8. The Scopes Monkey Trial (1925)
9. The Trial of Al Capone (1931)
10. The Nuremberg Trials (1945-49)
11. The O.J. Simpson Trial (1995)

Do you remember where you were when the O.J. Simpson verdict was read? Why do trials grab the attention of so many people? There must not be enough real trials in the world, so the entertainment industry has introduced us to other courtrooms. How many of you have watched one of these shows?

1. Judge Judy
2. Judge Roy Brown
3. Judge Mathis
4. The People's Court
5. Divorce Court
6. Parry Mason
7. Matlock

Why do trials grab the attention of so many people? If you will admit you find the world of law intriguing, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the sixth chapter of Acts. The spotlight is shining squarely on the rising star of the early church, Stephen. He is respected by everyone. Last week, we were told, he was so respected he got to serve on the first committee in the history of the church. (Lucky him!) This week, his legend continues to grow. He was performing miraculous signs and wonders among the people. That line is significant because he was the first one to perform a miracle besides the apostles.

In other words, the church continues to grow. The news of Stephen's miraculous power spreads throughout the land. Everyone must have been excited except one group, the Sanhedrin. The news of his miraculous signs and powers was bad news. Their Jesus problem continued. They responded to Stephen as they had responded to Jesus and Peter in the past. They had him arrested. Like Jesus and Peter, Stephen did nothing wrong. The Sanhedrin is desperate, so they break the law. They find people to offer false testimonies. In other words, they found people to lie about Stephen. It is shocking 2,000 years later. However, this was not the first time false testimony was used in the world, nor will it be the last. How many lies have been told about you?

So what does this ancient trial have to do with us and the contemporary church in America? Actually, there is a great connection between Stephen's trial and us. Just like Stephen, there are many who are trying to discredit the church. I don't know why so many have grown to hate the church. Maybe it is because they have trouble with authority figures? Maybe they are spiritually immature? Or maybe they are simply ignorant of the truth. I do not know why, but I do know their goal. They simply want the church to go away. You know it is true. We are not a perfect institution. The news has reported on all kinds of scandals. However, those stories are in the minority. Generally speaking, we have done nothing wrong. Yet, every day we are on trial even though we have done nothing wrong. Like Stephen, false testimonies are offered to discredit us. They are telling lies about us. How many lies have you heard about the church lately? There are many, but I only have time to look at two.

Today, I want to look at those two lies. With each one, I want to offer a rebuttal. Here are the lies I want to examine:

1. Life is better without religion.

2. All religion is the same.

Both lies are exposed when you discover that God wants to have a relationship with you! The faith has nothing to do with laws or rules. So if you are ready to look at those two examples of false testimonies, say, "**Amen!**"

Life is better without religion

This is lie number one: Life is better without religion. If you just look at the news, then you can see their point. How much religious tension exists in our world today? World history is spotted with religious wars. Many believe the worst is yet to come. Our world is getting smaller. Like it or not, improved transportation and communication is bringing us together!

Several years ago, I had the privilege of going to Israel. Some of you were with me. I can only speak for myself. I felt unprepared to visit that land. I felt humbled to be in Israel. Israel is unique for several reasons. One of those reasons is spiritual tension. I don't know how else to say it. God is doing something special in that land. After all, three major world religions have their origin there; Judaism, Christianity and Islam. No place illustrates that tension more than the Temple Mount.

It was the place where the old temple was located. That was where the Holy of holies was located. That is where the Hebrews believed God lived. That was the temple Jesus visited. It is such a sacred place for both Christians and Jews. Do you know what sits on that Temple Mount today? It is difficult for me to say it. It is even more difficult to accept. What sits on the Temple Mount today is the Dome of the Rock, one of the most sacred spots in the Muslim world. You don't have to go to Israel. Within our world today there are many examples of spiritual tension. The lie, life is better without religion, is built on that tension. If you believe spiritual tension exists in our world today, say, **"Amen!"**

This is my rebuttal. Real Christianity has nothing to do with a set of rules or beliefs. Real Christianity has nothing to do with being right or wrong. However, real Christianity has everything to do with relationships. Jesus came into the world to build a relationship with us. Prayer is important because you are building a relationship with God. Religions make a great flag to wave during times of war because they unite people to a higher cause. Real Christianity has nothing to do with politics. It is more personal. It has everyone to do with building a relationship with God. The people embraced Stephen's miraculous signs and miracles because they wanted a reminder that God was with them. We love to hear about miracles because we need to be reminded that God is with us. Real Christianity deals with relationships, not rules. Real Christianity deals with relationships, not politics. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

All religions are the same

This is lie number two: All religions are the same. Have you ever known someone who embraced that lie? It is a sociological way of looking at life. Every society needs a god, who regulates behavior of her citizens. He is the ultimate judge. In the end, he punishes the bad and rewards the good. Heaven is nothing more than a carrot to lead the people. It is a cold way of looking at life.

In 1967, the world was shocked when Joseph Stalin's daughter, Svetlana, defected to the United States. She did not just walk away from Russia and Communism. She walked away from family. She explained why she defected with these words:

"I found it impossible to exist without God in one's heart. I came to that conclusion myself, without anybody's help or preaching. That was a great change because since that moment the main dogmas of Communism lost their significance for me. I have come here to seek the self-expression that has been denied me for so long in Russia."

This is my rebuttal. Christianity is more than a series of laws. It is more than a moral code. Christianity is about relationships. Christianity fills a void in soul. Svetlana was not the first one to make this discovery. Consider these three quotes with me.

Pascal once said, *"There is within each person a God-shaped vacuum."*

Augustine said, *"My heart was restless until I found my rest in God."*

Rudolf Bultman once said, *"Within each one of us is a faint recollection of Eden calling us home."*

Christianity is not just rules and laws. Christianity has to do with being in a relationship with God. There was no reason to arrest Stephen if all religions were the same. Christianity is different. Christianity is unique. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Unless you have been living in a cave the past few months, you know the name Ariel Castro. You know his story. He held three young women hostage in his Cleveland home. On the day they escaped, he was charged. If you have lost count, he has been charged with 977 counts, including 512 counts of kidnapping and 446 counts of rape. How do you feel about Ariel Castro? Does anyone here believe Castro is innocent? Does anyone believe Castro is guilty? The other day he was in court to face the judge one more time. This time he stood before the judge and closed his eyes. It was like he was trying to escape his reality. The judge ordered him to open his eyes and look at her. Reluctantly, he did, but he never said a word.

If you haven't heard, the church is on trial. We can no longer just stand there with our eyes and mouth closed. We must defend ourselves because we have done nothing wrong. You can hear the lies. They are accepted by so many. Are you going to fight back with the truth, or do nothing? They say **life is better without religion**. They say **all religion is the same**. They are both wrong for the same reason. Christianity has nothing to do with being right or wrong. Christianity is more than a moral code. Christianity has to do with you and your relationship with God. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**