



**Message #16**  
**“CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH”**  
**Acts 7:1-53**

It was a simple question, just 4 words long.  
It was a lengthy answer...1,235 words in length.  
The ones asking the question are the inquisitors, the Sanhedrin.  
The one answering the question is the accused, Stephen.  
Whilst it is Stephen who will be killed, it is the Sanhedrin that is condemned.

The High Priest asked the question, **“Are these charges true?”** (Acts 7:1). He probably expected a simple Yes / No answer. Instead, he got the longest speech in all of Acts! And then some would say that the lengthy answer did not even respond to the question.  
Sometimes the speech in chapter 7 is called “Stephen’s defense”, although it is actually a defense of pure Christianity as God’s appointed way to worship.

What were the “charges” that had been levelled at Stephen? We must go back to Acts 6:13-14 to find out. In these verses, Stephen is accused of blaspheming against two sacred aspects of first-century Jewish life: the law and the temple. There were no more grievous charges to lay against a Jew, and it became a familiar tactic of the Jewish opponents of the early church (see Acts 18:12-13; 21:27-30).

However, as we read this chapter it is obvious that Stephen is not actually insulting either of those things. His speech reads like a lesson in the history of Israel, starting with Abraham and concluding with the building of the temple. It is more than an abstract history lesson. It is an exercise in **biblical theology**. He goes to great lengths to show that history anticipated the person and work of Jesus Christ, and how his opponents’ response to truth is nothing new. He demonstrates how both the temple and the law were actually fulfilled by Christ with the inauguration of the *new covenant*.

There are several points to consider in Stephen’s speech, but we will just highlight three for now.

**1. THE COVENANT OF CIRCUMCISION (7:8)**

God had entered into a special covenant relationship with the Jewish people and circumcision was given (and received) as a special identification ritual to Abraham and his descendants.

See **Genesis 17** (especially verses 10-11).

The covenant of circumcision was zealously passed down through the generations. Even Jesus was circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after birth, according to the Jewish custom.

The issue of circumcision became a very controversial and contentious point of difference between the Judaistic and Christian faiths.

Paul had a lot to say about this issue in his letter (see also Acts 15:1) where he explains that we have a new covenant in Christ and the old covenants are no longer necessary.

**Read Colossians 2:8-15, Galatians 6:11-18 and Ephesians 2:4-10.**  
**What do these passages say about salvation?**

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The Old Testament actually indicates that God is more interested in what’s happening INSIDE a person than what is happening on the outside. **See Deuteronomy 10:16.**  
**What do you think “circumcision of the heart” means?**

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**Romans 4:9f** is Paul's development of Stephen's argument...Abraham exercised faith which LED to circumcision; he did not believe BECAUSE of circumcision...circumcision was given because he believed!

## **2. SO YOU WANT TO GO BACK TO EGYPT? (7:39)**

Next, Stephen focuses on Moses to make some very powerful points.

Moses lived for 120 years, conveniently broken into three sections of forty years each.

In Stephen's speech, he addresses each section:

**7:20-22** – Moses' birth, adoption, education.

**7:23-29** – Moses' life from 40 – 80 years old.

**7:30-43** – Moses' call (the burning bush) and the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt.

**Verse 39:** In spite of all that Moses had done for the Israelites, and how he had led them out of Egypt, things got uncomfortable for them in the journey and they rejected Moses and "in their hearts returned to Egypt". Amazingly, the Israelites wanted to go back to the (relative) comfort of their known existence in the land of Egypt than to move forward into the unknown with God.

We can be like that, too...we can tend to want to hold on to the comforts of our "old life" rather than to embrace the "new life" we have in Christ.

- Are you holding onto something that you should let go of?
- Are you tending to look back at your old life, rather than look forwards to your new life in Christ?
- Do you long for the comforts of the old ways, rather than the challenges of a faithful life?

Christianity and comfort are not really able to co-exist.

The nearer we get to God's way of thinking, the more uncomfortable we will be with this world.

The more comfortable we are with the world, the more distant we will be from God.

We need to watch out for **the "4 Cs"....Comfort, Convenience, Complacency, Compromise.**

**Do you recognize any of these in your life and faith?**

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**Are you willing to step out of your comfort zone to follow and serve Jesus? How can you do this?**

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## **3. THE WORSHIP IN THE TEMPLE (7:44-50)**

In this passage, Stephen reminds his listeners that God cannot be contained in a box, not even one as magnificent as the Temple in Jerusalem...and nor is it the only place that God can be worshipped.

Stephen uses the Old Testament scriptures to show that God's presence was never confined to the temple, or even to the land of Israel. His arguments in these verses all lead to the conclusion in **verse 48: "The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands."**

It could be said that the Jewish faith had morphed from worshipping God in the Temple, to worshipping the Temple of God. Maybe they had made the temple into a kind of "idol" without realizing it.

**What are some of the things that Christians can turn into "idols" today?**

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In **2 Timothy 3:5**, Paul speaks of those who "...have a form of godliness but deny its power."

**How can we guard against anyone thinking that about us?**

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In Acts 6 Luke describes Stephen as being a man "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (6:5) and as a man "full of God's grace and power (6:8). In Acts 7 we also see Stephen as a man full of God's Word and courage"

**How did God directly minister to Stephen as he faced the angry leaders and his own death?**

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**In what ways would you like/need to be more like Stephen?**