

“Steven”

(Salvation, Purpose in Life, Genuine Christianity)

Acts 6-7

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A couple of years ago several public figures received a lot of press for their illegal or immoral actions. There were political, financial and religious figures involved. Jim Baker and Jimmy Swaggert were not the only two people who had committed acts of immorality or in Baker's case, fraud BUT they were vilified in the press more harshly than any others. Why?

Why was public outcry and media coverage greater in their case than in the case of others? Their HYPOCRISY! Those men claimed one thing and did another.

When Jesus was here on earth he was called the friend of sinners. While he was very clear about what sin was he was tender toward sinners. But for one group he reserved the harshest criticism. Which group? HYPOCRITES!

In particular he used his sternest rebuke on those who claimed to be all right with God but were not. Those who could look around themselves at others who they called thieves, cheats, adulterers, the less knowledgeable, and say: "I'm better than them. I'm one of God's people" or in today's language: "I'm a Christian."

Though forgiven, I can remember, to my shame, that I and my church friends, when with our other school friends, would talk with the same foul mouths, would use our girl friends in many of the same ways as others, and would engage in many of the same activities as them AND THEN when the subject of religion came up we would talk about how we knew we were Christians. And we would have the audacity on some occasions to attempt to talk them into becoming Christians like us. I only wonder now why they didn't hit us or throw up. SUCH HYPOCRISY! Though the sins change, that kind of hypocrisy goes on right into adulthood.

In Matthew and Mark Jesus called them "hypocrites." Quoting Isaiah Jesus said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." In the Gospel of Luke Jesus is quoted as telling the religious types: "You tithe but you neglect Justice and the love of God" You do your religious duties but you don't love others and you don't honestly love God.

Is possible to go to church your whole life, to believe in God and Jesus, to ask Jesus to forgive your sins, to say that you want him to come into your heart, AND STILL NOT BE A CHRISTIAN?

In ACTS 6 and 7 there is a very dramatic incident recorded. If this was made into a TV docudrama it would be quite a story. It's the account of an incredibly well-liked man who had done a great deal of good in the community- A "Mother Theresa" type. And then he is falsely accused of crimes against society by some jealous dirt-bags and most of the story is the trial where in testimony he demolishes the prosecution but the verdict is...and he's... Well, I'm getting ahead of the story.

You may remember that the new church in Jerusalem had a problem with food distribution - some members were claiming that they were being treated fairly. The Apostles (Peter, John, James etc.) asked the church to select seven men who could take charge of this social concerns project and give sufficient time to it so that it was done right. One of those seven men so selected was named STEVEN.

STEVEN was an extremely gifted and gracious man. He was bright, articulate, wise, kind, energetic and fearless. He was a man who took the job that the church gave him very seriously - He went into the community and began to not only distribute the funds and food fairly, but he began to pray for people and through him miracles of healing were done - people's lives were touched by this man. In the midst of all of that he was teaching people about Jesus.

Now the picture I want you to have is of a very devout, gracious, loving man who is loved by the people. That is why I said he's a "Mother Theresa type." This is one of those people you can't dislike. And people must have been listening and responding because a group of the religious leaders in Jerusalem became very jealous.

So the second act in this story is of a group of men who are angered by the popularity of Steven and are threatened by his message. If he's right then they are wrong. So a debate is scheduled in the synagogue. And what they thought would be a Holyfield-Foreman fight turned out with Foreman not just hanging in there but winning. He demolished their arguments and left them feeling exposed and vulnerable.

It looks like the good guy wins. But the plot turns sinister as the losers of the debate persuade some people to testify that Steven has blasphemed God. To get some idea of how serious this is, I think most of you remember Salmon Rushdie and his book Satanic Verses. In Iran that book was considered so blasphemous that the government put a warrant out for Rushdie's execution. Rushdie took that threat very seriously and hid for months.

Though the Romans controlled the area, the Jewish leaders were given a great deal of latitude in trying and punishing those who violated their religious laws. This is what Steven got caught in. He was charged with crimes that could cost him his life. All of the sudden the good guy is in serious trouble.

In the next scene we find Steven in court and the charges are being read. He is charged with speaking against the Temple and the Law. Steven is then asked to speak in his own defense.

What follows is a lengthy response wherein Steven retells the history of Israel - a history well known to all of those present at the trial. But in re-telling the history, Steven selects just certain incidents to recall. And in recalling them he emphasizes certain points to make his case.

Now to appreciate Stevens' selective history and emphasized points we must have a better idea of who he is addressing. If you have ever tried to read a novel by entering the book in the middle - then you realize how much you lose by not having the background of the first half of the book. So it is in reading about this trial. We need to remember something of the Old Testament and the Gospels if we will appreciate the significance of Steven's remarks.

The people who are trying Steven are people who have tried to put God in a box - the box of their own preferred ideas about God. They have created their own theology - their own belief system. They have said this is what God is like and this is what God expects and we are doing what God expects.

They believed that God was in the Temple in Jerusalem. Now if asked they would admit that God was bigger than that, but they lived as if they had exclusive rights to God - He was their God. Other people might have different gods or things they live for - but we honor THE God. See, we go to the Temple every day. We make the appropriate sacrifices. We are doing just what God wants. And the TEMPLE is very important – and don't you speak against it Steven!

And furthermore they believe that they had the Words of God in the Law; to them had been given the truth. They had the scrolls and they copied them carefully, they read them diligently, they protected them. We have the truth. Here it is. We believe in the inspired Word of God. We memorize it and teach our children to memorize it.

These people worshipped the Bible and the Temple. They had a very warped theology.

Theology is the Study of God. Unless someone just plain does not believe that there is a God, they have a theology. You might be an atheist ("a" as in "no" God). But otherwise, it may not be thought through or written down, but everyone has a theology - a belief about God. The people to whom Steven was speaking had one - what is yours? I'd like to suggest what I think is a very common theology among many people who call themselves Christians in our country and in our churches.

There are four parts to this description of **a modern person's theology**.

Who God is,
Who Jesus is,
My obligation
God's obligation.

Who God is: God created everything that is. He probably used evolution to do it - but He did it. God is "out there" somewhere doing whatever God does. I don't know what that is - but He's there. God hears my prayers BUT I'm responsible for working things out. God helps those who help themselves.

Who Jesus is: Jesus actually lived here on earth. He died on a cross. And somehow he died for sins. I don't know what that means but he did it. As to whether he actually rose from the dead physically, I'm not absolutely certain - but he certainly lives on - the spirit of Jesus' goodness and love lives on. In some way Jesus is still there.

My obligation: I am to live as good a life as I can. Now there is a lot more I don't understand but since I don't understand it and don't have all the facts I can't possibly be held accountable for it. I am just to believe in God and live as good as I can.

God's obligation: God is obligated to forgive me because some of the stuff I don't have enough information for. Plus God is obligated to forgive me for the things that I do know better because I'm only human and after all, "to err is human." Furthermore, if I do the best I can God owes me a good life. I don't mean that no bad things will ever happen but on the whole it will be a good life. And lastly, if there is actually a conscious life after death, then surely God will allow me to enjoy it - because I've done the best I could minus some mistakes.

That I believe is the theology of most of the 85% of Americans who call themselves Christians.

Now many of those who attend our evangelical churches across the country have added a little to the theology described above but it is still basically the same theology.

They have added that you must ask Jesus into your heart as your own personal savior. In fact they would say that that is a crucial distinction between them and all of those others who call themselves Christians. - They have asked Jesus into their hearts.

There is a great similarity between the theology of most American Christians and the people to whom Steven was speaking. Both groups have God safely tucked away in His place: A place where he doesn't bother them; A place where His presence has little to do with daily life; and a place where I can go to him when I want to - and when I don't, I can still know where he is.

Both groups (especially if I include those in evangelical churches) have the truth. They believe in the Bible, they think the Bible is important and they would not want anyone to take their Bible away.

Now look at your Bible and start with me at Chapter 7 verse 2 and see what Steven says to these people with this "God in a Box" Theology.

Verse 2 The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia. Where, in the Temple? NO

Verse 4 While Abram was in Haran, God met and sent him here. Where was God, in the Temple? NO

Verse 9 When Joseph was in Egypt, where was God? There. Where? In Egypt!

Verse 30 God appeared to Moses where? Midian. Midian? YES
And what did God say about the ground around that bush in the Midian desert? It is HOLY ground.

Verse 37 Moses said that God would send you a prophet. And you know that Jesus claimed to be that prophet.

Verses 38-39 Your forefathers were given the living words (the law - the Bible but they didn't obey it. They chased after other gods instead - they lived for other reasons than for the God.

Verses 44-50 Yes it is true that God told them to build a tabernacle first (a temporary temple) and then yes it is true that David planned and then Solomon finally built a temple BUT it was never God's intention that such a building should contain God. God was never saying that He was now limited to living in this place only. - or that if you wanted to meet God then you go to the Temple. Or that your

religious life was what you did at the temple and otherwise God was largely unconcerned.

The next few words from Steven given in verses 51-53 are words that I'm afraid I wouldn't have said. 7:51-53 "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!"⁵² Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—⁵³ you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

"Stiff-necked," "Uncircumcised hearts and ears."

Steven may be a very nice man but he is not the king of tact.

(Someone gave me some 3-M Post-it sticker notes. They have Garfield the cat saying - TACT IS FOR WEENIES.)

As I read these verses, it seems to me that Steven is saying: "You guys have the audacity to say that I dishonor the temple and speak against the Law? You dishonor God and disobey the Law. You dishonor God by assuming that he is so tame as to live in your little Temple. You dishonor God by getting locked into your little theology and you don't even see God. You think you are controlling Him instead of him being lord of your lives. And speaking of the Law - you may have it, read it, and memorize it but you don't obey it. You aren't God's people - you resist the Holy Spirit. God has loved you all of these years in order to have an honest to goodness relationship with you but instead you created a little theology about God, stuffed him into it, and go about doing as you please.

It is frightening to think about how many of us who attend evangelical churches have done the same thing! In our minds we have created a safe, controllable religion: Our theology as I said earlier is a variation of this: God is there, Jesus died for my sins, I should do the best I can and God will reward me now and later.

That God is not the God of the Scriptures. The God of the Bible is the Center of our lives. Our idea of God is a rich old man who is shoved into one or two hours a week and maybe a prayer each day and will help us out from time to time if we want it.

The God of the Bible is a God who shapes our values, changes our motives, and enables us to genuinely love something other than ourselves. Our idea of God is one who has a great deal to do with our religious life but nothing to do with "real" life.

When we take a close look at ourselves, the selfishness of our lives is staggering. We live to meet our needs and if God is a part of that it is only so that we might get his help in fulfilling our desires.

BUT every so often even the most insensitive man or woman steps out of character and genuinely and altruistically helps another person. They do something for someone out of the goodness of their heart. And the reality of that experience is so powerful and so much more satisfying than all the things they normally strive for that they wonder if only for a fleeting moment what is life for anyway. They get just a taste of something bigger than themselves. They get just a glimpse of what it could be like to honestly live for others - and they like the taste, they enjoy the vision - but they are soon over it as they go back to serving themselves.

Jesus said there are two principles of life. If these two principles are lived they will bring fulfillment and purpose to life. The first principle is to love God with your whole personality. The second principle is to love others in the same way that you love yourself.

God has given us a power to love. Our problem is that we have turned that power in on ourselves. We have used that power to achieve, to acquire, to accumulate. But most people, somewhere along the line, sooner or later, begin to realize that all of this achievement and acquisition has left them still feeling hollow, empty. They strived so long and when they got there - there was nothing. And now the habits of serving themselves are so ingrained, the patterns so entrenched that they don't know what to do. They'd like to live for something bigger, something better, something that lasts longer but they're afraid. Afraid of what? Afraid they'll lose all the things that they have treasured so long. Afraid of what they'll have to give up.

Back to our story: How did these good church people respond to Steven's challenge of their motives and their actions?

7:54, 57-58 “When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him... ⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

God in Christ had come to do a new thing in their lives. God desired to free them from themselves. God wanted to liberate them from the self-centeredness that kills and give them love that would make them alive - truly alive. But they would not let loose of their old patterns - their old ways -their old loves.

God did not want to be the religious compartment in their lives - He wanted to be the lord, the companion, the lover, the friend, the very center of their lives.

Today, Jesus is not asking you just to believe certain facts about Him and relegate Him to the religious compartment of your life - He wants to have a daily relationship with you. A relationship of love, of companionship, of lordship. He desires to have the control of your life so that he may lead you into a real, lasting and satisfying life.

If Jesus is to you only a doctrine, a theology, If Jesus is to you only a religion to whom is given a few hours on Sunday or a prayer when you are in trouble, if Jesus is to you only an escape hatch by which when you die you will go to heaven instead of hell, THEN THERE IS REASON TO BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE NOT A CHRISTIAN!

Jesus is not some piddling shelf-god like the other religions- HE IS LORD! And either He is lord of your life and increasingly influencing the way you think, the things you love, the people you love and the way you love them, the way you spend your time, the way you spend your money, the things you value, how you operate your business, how you do your work, how you relate to people, or you are not a Christian.

How about you? Have you created your own theology? Have you put God in that box so that you could go on living as you desire and still have him available? Have you seen the folly of such a self-centered life? Are you ready for a life of love - a life given to others and to God, a life that will count for eternity, a life lived in relationship with Him ?

Yes! but how do I get that? Jesus said come and follow him. Are you ready to trust him to be Lord of your life?

I want to follow Him, but I'm afraid of what He might want me to do! That pretty well summarizes it all. Who will you trust, him or yourself?