

Numerous other evidences might be given to the same effect did space permit and were it necessary to produce them, but those which have been selected, from the abundance of material at hand, are sufficient to prove the accuracy of our contention that the Protestantism which sprang into existence in the Alpine valleys, so far from being strangled in its infancy, was, on the contrary, fostered and cradled in the region of its birth, and developed slowly but surely, and unperceived by its foes, into the fair proportions of the Waldensian and Moravian brotherhoods. Indeed, it may have even penetrated, as many suppose, into England before the days of Wycliffe, with the result that to-day ancient history is not only repeating itself in the conflicts around us, but that we are actually engaged in the same battle, armed with the same spiritual weapons, which our forefathers waged and wielded sixteen centuries ago. Possibly our brief consideration may have led some to the further conclusion that, amidst the entire galaxy of illustrious names which adorn the annals of the evangelical Church of Christ, whether ancient or modern, none shines with a clearer radiance than that of him who has come down to us loaded with the invectives of Jerome and branded with the hall-mark of heresy—Vigilantius of Gaul.



## Free and Universal Access to God.

BY THE REV. W. S. HOOTON, B.A.

**I**N tracing the stages by which the primitive Church fulfilled the Great Commission of Acts i. 8—a text which is universally taken as the key to the whole book—it is usual to observe that its members were led to a fuller obedience by the persecution which scattered them after Stephen's death (viii. 1-4). This was indeed the turning-point, at which they were led to strike out from the centre till ultimately "the uttermost part" of the circumference should be reached. But the

coming expansion is foreshadowed at an earlier stage. The principle which led to it is to be seen in the preceding section (vi. 8-vii. 60), which provides the present subject of study, and it was that principle which lay at the root of all the apostolic labours that are recorded throughout the remainder of the history. Its recognition is therefore vital to a true understanding of the book.

A superficial reader might ask with surprise, Why is Stephen's speech so fully recorded? As Professor Sir W. M. Ramsay points out,<sup>1</sup> the author "seizes the critical events, concentrates the reader's attention on them by giving them fuller treatment, touches more lightly and briefly on the less important events, omits entirely a mass of unimportant details, and makes his work an artistic and idealized picture of the progressive tendency of the period." We may, therefore, be sure that so much space given to the position held by Stephen in the history, and especially to his speech, must indicate a notable crisis. It will be the chief part of the present inquiry to consider wherein so critical an importance lay.

But the superficial reader might go on to say, Why did the matter of the speech rouse his hearers to such fury? In the main it was an historical survey of events in the national career which were familiar to them all. At first sight it may not be easy to see why Stephen chose this method of answering to the charges laid against him, or, indeed, what there is in the speech which provides any answer to those charges; and it may be still more difficult to understand the effect which his argument had upon the Jews, or the reason why all this should be set out at such length while so many other things are entirely passed over. Further, we note that this historical survey is a new feature in the address. The brief reports of those recorded earlier in the book are marked by common characteristics. But in Stephen's speech we have a new method—not a simple testimony and a direct appeal, but an elaborate argument and a fierce denunciation (for, though

<sup>1</sup> "St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen," p. 3. Cf. p. 385.

the Apostles plainly told the Jews of their guilt, there is something altogether special about this tremendous attack). The historical method would not perhaps appeal to us as it did to those Jews, who had such self-righteous pride in their national history, but it was evidently effective, as we find it somewhat similarly employed by St. Paul at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts xiii.). Nay, its force was so stinging, in the new light thrown by Stephen upon the familiar records, that apparently some marked change in their demeanour led him to the final outburst of righteous wrath, as by a digression from his subject. Most evidently it was a method of argument which had powerful force ; it is for us to try to discover the reason.

The substance of the charges laid against him (vi. 11, 13, 14) throws light upon our inquiry. We may reduce them to two main indictments—he had impugned the sanctity of the Law and of the Temple. These accusations were, of course, false ; but there is proverbially no lie so injurious or so misleading as that which is a half-truth, and there had doubtless been, in Stephen's bold teaching, some ground for his enemies so to distort his words. As a Grecian Jew, he was the first to grasp clearly and teach fully the universal application of the Gospel and the spirituality of true worship. It is easy to see how his enemies could find a handle against him in such teaching. His special ability and spiritual power in propounding it would only incense them the more.

And how does he answer them ? He does not attempt to deny or to minimize whatever of truth underlay the accusation. Like the Apostles before him, he uses his trial as an opportunity for further fearless witness. And like his Master, he emphasizes at such a crisis the truth which he had taught. Moreover, he enforces conviction on his unwilling hearers by unanswerable proof from their own history. When, and how, he asks, did God reveal Himself to the chosen people ? To Abraham, the father of the faithful, in heathen Mesopotamia, and then in heathen Haran. Even in Canaan He gave him no actual possession, but plainly foretold the sojourn of his seed in heathen

Egypt. There, too, God revealed Himself to Joseph and afterwards to Moses, their great law-giver, and was with him and the people in that heathen land, as afterwards in the wilderness. How, then, could they assume that God could not reveal Himself to any seeking soul among the heathen of their own day? Stephen began to discern what was afterwards revealed to Peter: "In every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him."<sup>1</sup> And then, again, about the "holy place"—is not every place holy, when God could thus vouchsafe His presence anywhere? Is not that place holy where God is? Besides all those other proofs of His presence in such places, there was the "holy ground" at the burning bush in heathen Midian; the Law itself was given on Mount Sinai; and the Tabernacle moved from place to place (all the while on heathen ground). Then, for long after entering on their possession they had no settled place for its abode, and even David could not build the Temple as he wished. And when Solomon built it at last, he acknowledged<sup>2</sup> in his prayer of dedication (1 Kings viii. 27) the very truth which Stephen now proclaims (Acts vii. 48-50) on the authority of the prophet Isaiah, that "the Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands"<sup>3</sup>—a truth which had to be enforced upon perverted Judah now, just as, later, upon heathen Athens (see xvii. 24). And when we remember that, besides all this, there were interspersed in the address plain reminders of the way in which their fathers had rejected Joseph and Moses (here they could scarcely fail to see allusions to their own rejection of the Saviour), we cease to wonder why it was that they were roused to frenzy and that Stephen broke off his argument. They had refused the Prophet Whom their own law-giver

<sup>1</sup> Acts x. 35.

<sup>2</sup> "The builder of the Temple had himself felt that it was the witness not of a localized but a universal Presence." Dean Plumptre in Bishop Ellicott's Commentary (v. 48).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. our Lord's teaching in John iv. 21-24. If, as has been thought, there was any connection between Stephen and the Samaritans, fresh force is added to this comparison, and the enmity of the Jews is yet more clearly understood. Cf. Dean Plumptre again.

had foretold (verse 37); their fathers had been idolaters (verse 41-43) and murderers of the prophets (verse 52); and they had proved themselves their true sons, he now fiercely tells them, in resisting the Holy Ghost, slaying the Just One, and breaking, themselves, that very law which they accused him of profaning (verses 51-53).<sup>1</sup>

We are thus brought to a clear answer to our inquiries. Stephen died for two great principles, which had doubtless formed a prominent part of the preaching that made him so marked a man, and gave a handle to his enemies for their accusation. These were the principles of a door of salvation open to all the world, and of spirituality of worship, with freedom of access to the Divine presence. The clear vindication, from their own Scripture history, of these principles of free and universal access, was the cause of the fury to which his opponents were roused. They could not resist his preaching before, and they were in reality as helpless now. Their only resource was the resource of the coward—brute force. That fatal tendency which appears in their earlier persecution of our Lord and His Apostles—the determination to resist conviction even while they felt their real helplessness<sup>2</sup>—came to a height now. The same spirit which led them later to cry against St. Paul, “Away with such a fellow from the earth,” when he declared his mission to the Gentiles (xxii. 21, 22), came to a head now against Stephen. As we read there, “They gave him audience unto this word,” so here they will bear with Stephen no longer when his full meaning is really plain to them.<sup>3</sup>

It now becomes clear to us why so much space is given to the events connected with Stephen's death, and especially to his speech. We have reached the most important epoch in the history of the Church since Pentecost. We are on the eve of a

<sup>1</sup> A suggestive analysis of the speech may be found in the Cambridge Bible, Introduction, pp. xi, xii.

<sup>2</sup> Cf., e.g., John xi. 48, xii. 19; Acts iv. 13-22, v. 17-42.

<sup>3</sup> An instructive parallel from our Lord's own ministry is to be found in Luke iv. 25-27. His bold vindication, from their own Scriptures, of offers of mercy outside the chosen people led to the same result—they were not humbled and melted, but they were ready to slay Him (verses 28, 29).

vital development, in which the Gospel is to be preached outside the limits of Jerusalem (the scene of the work of witness up to this point), and even beyond Judæa. The wider fulfilment of the commission is at hand, and it is therefore important that we should be shown the course of events which led to this expansion.<sup>1</sup> It is characteristic of the author's method to present to us here the first full exhibition of the doctrine which was to bear fruit in extension even to "the uttermost part of the earth." Not only was Stephen the first Christian martyr (which in itself gives a special prominence to his death), but he died for principles essential to the fulfilment of the Master's command which gives us the key to the Acts (i. 8). His death itself, as we shall see more fully presently, was a link in the chain of circumstances which led to that fulfilment. Is it any wonder, then, that the account is given in such full detail?

It is only possible briefly to note here that the principles for which Stephen contended were soon afterwards confirmed by Divine interposition in the case of Cornelius (another of the most fully detailed narratives in the Acts), and that the point at issue formed the subject of solemn debate and decision in the Council held at Jerusalem (chap. xv.). Judaistic influence, as we know from the Epistles, long troubled the Church in the matter, but the threefold sanction of the prominent incidents we have just now noted in the history is a plain proof of the vital importance of the struggle for liberty which was maintained by St. Stephen and St. Paul.

Two practical lessons may be drawn in conclusion.

1. Did Stephen die in vain?<sup>2</sup> Did he lose all the fruit of the remarkable work which had gone before? The world, seeing the dispersion that followed, would have thought so. If we had lived then, we might have been sorely tempted to think so. But we see things in truer perspective from our distance, and we recognize that God was glorified as fully by Stephen's death as by the deliverance which had before been granted to Peter and John and the rest. It may be said that by his death

<sup>1</sup> Cf. viii. 1-4.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. E. M. Knox's Bible Lessons on Acts.

he obtained what he sought by his life. For by it he opened the way, unconsciously, for that diffusion of the truth which above all things he desired; and the startling introduction at this point of the name of Saul reminds us that at least one chief actor in the scene—perhaps the ringleader of all—was the very one chosen, in God's marvellous providence, to carry into effect the great plan for which Stephen laid down his life. And who shall say that Stephen's martyrdom may not have been a factor in Saul's conversion? The martyr would not have died in vain if he had only left behind the record of his Christlike words and demeanour, and his vision of the Master rising to succour and receive him.<sup>1</sup> But when we add the mighty effects that his death had in the fulfilment of the Divine plan—effects not just then visible, but now in full daylight—we must surely be put to shame when we are inclined to murmur at what God's providence allows, or to talk of "mysterious dispensations" in a tone of far from joyful or even patient resignation. We cannot see things in clear perspective with reference to their surroundings till we are far away from them, but hereafter we shall know.

2. Stephen's principles are not unneeded now! Is there no exclusiveness among English Christians, which is as proud and uncharitable, and in essence as unbelieving, as the exclusiveness of those Jews? Do we never hear of "leaving the heathen to their own religions," and do people never speak as if Christ died for England only? Apart from the pride of privilege which is implied in such suggestions,<sup>2</sup> and the ingratitude which forgets that we ourselves should have been heathen but for others who, in the spirit of Stephen and of Paul, brought the truth to us, what realization of the meaning of sin and salvation can there be, or what kind of belief in Christ at all, in those who thus deny His claim to be the only Saviour, and disloyally

<sup>1</sup> The ascended Saviour is elsewhere represented as *seated*, in the position of triumph, authority, and rest. The variation here may be understood as above.

<sup>2</sup> Pride of privilege was, of course, the root of Jewish sin. Cf. Matt. iii. 9, and other passages.

neglect His command<sup>1</sup> to pass on the blessings of the Faith to those who do not know them? And, worst of all, what desire can there be to enthrone Him as King over all the kingdoms of the world?

Or, to take Stephen's other principle of spirituality of worship and freedom of access, is there no fear to-day of a ceremonialism which is as dead and formal as anything in Judaism could have been? Are there no priestly claims which are as arrogant as any that ever barred mankind from coming, through Christ, "boldly unto the throne of grace"?<sup>2</sup> Would that the Church in all ages had been wise enough to read in this inspired record of the Church's earliest age the principles which would have kept it pure, vigorous, expansive, and fruitful! Are we wise enough to do so now?

Stephen's story, and Stephen's speech, are full of points which might doubtless be amplified to almost any extent; but our study of this great epoch will not be thrown away if the main lessons of the crisis are impressed upon us, and its principles translated by us into action, in our own work of witness.



## Spiritual Phenomena in the Light of Electrical Science.

By JOHN F. COOTE, A.M.I.E.E.

**T**O the Christian, spiritual communion is such an axiom of his religious life, that he is sometimes apt to accept this inestimable privilege without attempting to understand the working of such a mystery. He believes that God speaks individually to him, putting into his mind "all holy desires, all good counsels," yet if he were asked to explain how this could be, he would often probably be at a loss to do so.

Most of us, I suppose, think of it in some vague way as an

<sup>1</sup> Cf. John xiv. 15 (R.V.), and xv. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Heb. iv. 16.