

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 7

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Acts 7 is Stephen's defense speech before the Sanhedrin, the longest speech in Acts and one of the most theologically dense passages in the New Testament. It is not a legal defense in the conventional sense — Stephen does not argue his innocence against the charges of blasphemy against Moses and the temple (Acts 6:13–14). Instead, he reframes the accusation entirely, delivering a sweeping survey of Israel's history from Abraham through Solomon, structured around a recurring and devastating thesis: Israel has always resisted God's appointed deliverers and rejected His presence wherever He chose to locate it. The speech moves through four major historical periods — Abraham and the patriarchs (vv. 1–16), Moses and the Exodus (vv. 17–43), the tabernacle and temple (vv. 44–50), and the direct accusation (vv. 51–53) — before concluding in the stoning and martyrdom of Stephen (vv. 54–60). The speech is not a rehearsal of facts for their own sake; every historical selection is load-bearing. Stephen chooses episodes in which God was present and working *outside* the land and *ahead of* human-built structures, and in which God's appointed agents were rejected by the very people they came to deliver. The climax (vv. 51–53) makes the application explicit: the Sanhedrin's rejection of Jesus is not an anomaly — it is the culmination of a centuries-long pattern of stiff-necked resistance to the Holy Spirit.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through this chapter is simultaneously prosecutorial, evangelistic, and martyrological. It is prosecutorial in that the Sanhedrin is put on trial by Israel's own history — their rejection of Jesus is exposed as the latest and definitive instance of the same rebellion that rejected Joseph, rejected Moses, and demanded a calf in the wilderness. It is evangelistic in that the speech extends the offer implicit in every refused deliverer: there is still a Deliverer, and He is the one you crucified. It is martyrological in that Stephen's death seals the testimony — the one delivering the indictment dies as Jesus died, forgiving his killers, commending his spirit to the Lord. God is seeking through this chapter to strip the Sanhedrin (and every subsequent reader) of every religious credential that could serve as a buffer against the claims of Christ. The temple is not a guarantee of divine favor; proximity to the law is not righteousness; descent from Abraham is not protection. The only question is whether, hearing the Holy Spirit speak through Scripture and through servants of Christ, the hearer will finally relent — or will add another stone.

Subject Sentence: Israel's long history of rejecting God's deliverers reaches its climax in the rejection and death of Jesus.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every hearer who shelters behind religious heritage, sacred institutions, and covenant privilege with the searching question Stephen's speech demands: *Will you continue the pattern, or will you finally receive the One to whom all of it pointed?* The church's martyrs do not die in defeat — they die in vindication, with heaven opened and Christ standing to receive them.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature of Stephen's Speech — Historical Survey or Theological Argument?

Some readers, particularly in older liberal scholarship and some contemporary lectionary preaching, treat the speech as essentially catechetical — a rehearsal of salvation history with the Christological application tacked on at the end as the early church's editorial addition. On this reading, Stephen is giving a kind of Deuteronomic history lesson that turns pointed only in its conclusion. This reading must be refuted. The speech is structured as a unified theological argument from its first verse. Every episode Stephen selects is chosen precisely because it demonstrates the pattern he names in verses 51–53. The omissions are as telling as the inclusions — he does not mention Sinai's law-giving as a moment of divine favor; he mentions it to show the people immediately breaking the covenant with a golden calf. He does not mention David's kingdom as Israel's golden age; he mentions it to transition to Solomon and then to the critique of the temple. The historical survey *is* the argument. Nothing is added at the end that was not already present at the beginning.

The Anti-Temple Polemic — Replacement Theology or Christological Fulfillment?

A significant interpretive question concerns Stephen's argument about the temple (vv. 44–50, citing Isaiah 66:1–2). Some readers, including certain strands of dispensationalism, read this passage as *not* a critique of the temple institution but merely a critique of the Sanhedrin's *attitude* toward the temple — they have made it an idol while Stephen simply affirms that God transcends it. On this reading, the temple remains eschatologically significant. Others, particularly in older covenant-theological reading, see Stephen as arguing for the temple's permanent obsolescence now that Christ has come. The Reformed reading holds a middle course with Christological fulfillment at its center: Stephen is not arguing that physical structures are inherently illegitimate (the tabernacle, which was divinely commanded, receives positive treatment in vv. 44–46), but that the Sanhedrin has made the temple an idol — a guarantee of divine presence that insulates them from the prophetic claim of Christ. The critique is not anti-temple per se; it is anti-idolatry of religious structures. The Hebrews epistle will develop this more fully: the

temple's function is fulfilled in Christ; clinging to the institution after the Reality has arrived is the error Stephen is exposing. This reading should be preferred as it accounts for both the positive treatment of the tabernacle and the sharp critique of those who claim the temple as a protective credential.

The Repeated Pattern of Rejection — Typology or Historical Accident?

Pentecostal and some charismatic readings sometimes focus on the phrase “you always resist the Holy Spirit” (v. 51) as a description of a specific kind of hardness against the Spirit’s contemporary work — making it a warning primarily about quenching spiritual gifts or resisting revival movements. While this application captures a genuine dimension of the text, it narrows what Stephen explicitly says. The “resistance” he has in mind is specifically the rejection of God’s appointed prophets and deliverers — Joseph, Moses, and ultimately Jesus — not a general tendency to suppress charismatic experience. The Reformed reading contextualizes “resist the Holy Spirit” as resistance to the Spirit’s testimony through the Word, through the prophets, and through Christ Himself. This is a broader and more textually grounded claim, and it should be preferred — though it does not preclude the valid application that resistance to the Spirit’s word through faithful preaching is a live possibility for every congregation.

Stephen’s Vision (vv. 55–56) — Christ Standing or Enthronement?

A minor but interesting interpretive question surrounds Stephen’s vision of the Son of Man “standing at the right hand of God” (v. 56). Most texts depict Christ as *seated* at the right hand (Psalm 110:1; Hebrews 1:3). Why standing? Some read this as Christ rising to receive the testimony of His faithful martyr — an act of honor. Others read it as Christ rising in judgment against the Sanhedrin — the standing judge. The Reformed tradition has generally preferred the former: Christ stands as a witness on Stephen’s behalf and to receive him — the only time in Scripture where He is described as standing rather than seated. Both dimensions — reception of the martyr and vindication of the testimony — are likely present. The preacher should hold both without forcing a single interpretation. What is certain is that heaven’s perspective on Stephen’s death is the opposite of the Sanhedrin’s: they see blasphemy deserving death; heaven sees a faithful witness being received by his Lord.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 37–50 (Joseph)** — The Joseph narrative provides Stephen’s first type of the rejected-but-vindicated deliverer: Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers, becomes the instrument of their salvation. Stephen’s brief treatment (vv. 9–16) establishes the pattern that will govern the entire speech.
- **Exodus 2–4; 32 (Moses)** — The Moses material (vv. 17–43) is the heart of Stephen’s typological argument. Moses is rejected twice by his own people (“Who made you a ruler and judge?” — v. 27, echoing v. 35); he is the prophet who foretold “a prophet

like me” (Deuteronomy 18:15, cited in v. 37); and Israel, even after the Exodus, immediately abandons him for an idol. The pattern is complete in Moses before Christ arrives.

- **Isaiah 66:1–2** — Cited directly in verses 49–50, this text from Third Isaiah provides Stephen’s biblical warrant for the critique of the temple: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord.” God’s presence cannot be contained in stone; those who think it can are repeating the error of every generation before them.
- **Psalms 110:1** — The background text for Stephen’s vision (vv. 55–56): Christ seated/standing at the right hand of the Father. The vision confirms that Jesus, rejected by the Sanhedrin as a blasphemer, occupies the position of universal lordship. Stephen sees what the Sanhedrin cannot.
- **Hebrews 11:8–16; 3:7–19** — Hebrews develops both strands of Stephen’s argument: the faith of the patriarchs who lived as strangers without a fixed geographical claim (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob — “they acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth”), and the warning against the hardness that marked the wilderness generation. Hebrews and Acts 7 share a common theological world and illuminate each other directly.

Aim: To demonstrate that Stephen’s speech is not a historical lecture but a prosecutorial-evangelistic confrontation — showing both that Israel’s rejection of Jesus is the climax of a long pattern and that the martyrdom of the church’s witnesses is not defeat but vindication, so that hearers will examine whether they shelter behind religious credentials rather than receiving Christ.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	High priest asks Stephen: “Are these things so?”	Stephen does not deny the charge; he reframes the entire framework of the trial
2–8	Abraham: called out of Mesopotamia before circumcision, before the land, before the law; covenant of circumcision given; promise of possession and descendants	God works <i>outside</i> the land; the promise precedes every human institution; twelve patriarchs established

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
9–16	Joseph: sold into slavery by the patriarchs out of jealousy; God was with him; Joseph saves his family; Jacob and the patriarchs die in Egypt	First instance of the rejection-vindication pattern; the brothers' betrayal becomes the vehicle of salvation
17–22	Moses' birth, rescue, and Egyptian education	Moses prepared by God outside Israel's normal structures; "mighty in words and deeds"
23–29	Moses' first attempt to deliver Israel — kills the Egyptian, rebukes the fighting Israelites; rejected: "Who made you a ruler and judge?" — Moses flees	First rejection of Moses; the pattern begins; the deliverer is refused by the people he came to save
30–38	God appears to Moses at the burning bush in Midian (outside the land); commissions him; Moses leads the Exodus; receives "living oracles" at Sinai; foretells "a prophet like me" (Deut. 18:15)	God appears outside the land, in a burning bush — not in a temple; the prophet-like-Moses prediction is explicitly Christological in Luke-Acts
39–43	Israel rejects Moses in the wilderness — "push him aside," make the golden calf; God gives them over to worship the host of heaven; cites Amos 5:25–27	Second rejection of Moses; even after the Exodus, Israel refuses the deliverer; God's judgment is the giving-over to idolatry
44–46	The tabernacle of witness — built according to God's pattern; carried through the wilderness and into the land under Joshua and David	Tabernacle receives positive treatment — it was divinely commanded and portable; David finds favor and seeks to build a house for God
47–50	Solomon builds the temple — but "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands"; cites Isaiah 66:1–2: heaven is God's throne, earth His footstool	The temple is not where God lives; those who claim it as a credential misunderstand both God and the prophets

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
51–53	Direct accusation: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit... which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who announced the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered — you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it”	The indictment lands; the Sanhedrin is charged as heirs of the entire pattern; they received the law and violated it
54–56	The crowd is enraged; Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazes into heaven and sees the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; reports the vision	Heaven opens; Christ stands to receive His martyr; the Sanhedrin sees nothing
57–58	The crowd rushes at Stephen, drags him out of the city, begins stoning him; witnesses lay their garments at the feet of Saul	First mention of Saul; the martyrdom proceeds as a mob action, not a formal legal execution
59–60	Stephen prays: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”; “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”; falls asleep	Stephen’s death explicitly mirrors Christ’s death (Luke 23:34, 46); the martyr dies as his Lord died

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–16	The Patriarchs: Promise Before Place — God Works Outside the Land
2	17–43	Moses: The Deliverer Twice Refused and Israel’s Wilderness Idolatry

Division	Verses	Label
3	44–50	The Tabernacle and Temple: God Cannot Be Housed in Human Structures
4	51–53	The Indictment: You Are the Culmination of the Pattern
5	54–60	The Martyrdom: Heaven Opens, Christ Stands, Stephen Dies as Jesus Died

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Israel’s long history of rejecting God’s deliverers reaches its climax in the rejection and death of Jesus.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every hearer who shelters behind religious heritage, sacred institutions, and covenant privilege with the searching question Stephen’s speech demands: *Will you continue the pattern, or will you finally receive the One to whom all of it pointed?* The church’s martyrs do not die in defeat — they die in vindication, with heaven opened and Christ standing to receive them.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine what you are trusting instead of Christ. (*Mind/belief*) Stephen’s indictment is not that the Sanhedrin lacked religion — they had more of it than anyone. Their problem was that their religion had become a substitute for the Deliverer to whom all of it pointed. Every hearer of this passage must perform the same examination: What is functioning in my life as a credential before God that is not Christ Himself? Church attendance, Reformed theology rightly understood, family heritage, a conversion experience years in the past, a position of ministry leadership — any of these can become a temple, a structure that insulates me from the ongoing claim of the living Christ. Stephen’s speech will not allow any religious credential to stand unchallenged. The question is whether the thing you are trusting is pointing you to Jesus or protecting you from Him.

2. Let Israel’s pattern grieve you as Stephen’s vision delighted him. (*Affections/worship*) Stephen does not deliver his indictment in cold legal terms — he delivers it as a man who sees Israel’s history as a tragedy, a long series of refused mercies. Each rejected deliverer was a refused grace — Joseph could have been received as a brother and a gift; Moses could have been welcomed rather than demanded, “Who made you a ruler?” The cumulative weight of this history should produce grief, not merely theological analysis. And yet the grief is not the final note: Stephen, in the moment of his death, sees heaven open and Christ standing. The affective movement this chapter demands is grief over refused

grace and joy over the vindication that awaits every witness who receives what Israel refused. Let both emotions have their full weight.

3. Stop expecting God to stay where you have put Him. (*Mind/belief*) The theological nerve of Stephen's temple critique (vv. 44–50) is that God has never been locatable in the way His people wanted. He appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia. He appeared to Moses in Midian, in a burning bush. He was present in a tent that moved through the wilderness. The temple, when it came, was Solomon's doing — and the prophets immediately began qualifying it. The Sanhedrin's error is not unique to them — it is a recurring human temptation to domesticate God, to anchor Him in an institution, a tradition, a place, or a form that can then be managed and leveraged. The living God of Acts 7 refuses all such management. He is the God who goes where He chooses, speaks through whom He chooses, and calls His people to follow Him rather than to preserve their preferred structures.

4. Receive the witness of faithful martyrs — do not stop your ears. (*Will/behavior*) The Sanhedrin's response to Stephen's speech is viscerally physical — they “stopped their ears and rushed together at him” (v. 57). The image is not incidental: this is what resistance to the Holy Spirit looks like in its most naked form. It is not argument; it is noise and violence used to prevent the claim from landing. Every hearer of Scripture has access to a version of this response that stops short of stones — the quick dismissal, the mental change of subject, the retreat into objection before the indictment is fully heard. The concrete application is this: when faithful preaching or Scripture itself begins to press an uncomfortable claim, do not stop your ears. Stay. Listen. Let the claim reach you. The Sanhedrin could have responded differently — Stephen's speech ends with an invitation as much as an indictment.

5. Witness and pray for those who are most violently opposed. (*Will/behavior*) Stephen's final words — “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” — are not pious sentiment. They are the outworking of the gospel in the moment of maximum cost. And they are answered: one of the witnesses holding the garments at Stephen's feet is Saul of Tarsus (v. 58), who will become Paul the apostle. Stephen's dying prayer is answered in the conversion of the man who most immediately represents the violence Stephen suffered. The application is not that martyrdom is being called for in every context, but that the posture of intercession for opponents — even violent ones — is both demanded by the gospel and historically fruitful. Who are the most aggressive opponents of the gospel in your world? Pray for them specifically. Stephen's prayer was not wasted.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 7 reveals that God's presence, provision, and saving purpose have never been captive to human geography, human institution, or human heritage. From Abraham in Mesopotamia to Moses at a bush in Midian to the tabernacle traveling through a desert, God demonstrates that He cannot be managed by those who

think they house or own Him. The repeated pattern of rejection — Joseph, Moses, the prophets, and finally Jesus — reveals both the depth of human resistance to divine grace and the relentless patience of God, who sends deliverer after deliverer before the final and definitive one arrives. The martyrdom of Stephen demonstrates that death in faithful witness is not abandonment — heaven opens at the moment of maximum earthly opposition, and Christ stands to receive His servant. The chapter also reveals the nature of sin not merely as individual moral failure but as structural, generational resistance to the Holy Spirit speaking through God’s appointed agents.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Acts 7 is a canonical exhibit of total depravity in its covenantal dimension — not the depravity of pagans ignorant of God, but the depravity of the most religiously privileged people on earth, who received the law by angels and did not keep it. Stephen’s indictment strips every form of works-righteousness and covenant presumption of its protective power: lineage, law, and temple are not shields; they are witnesses against those who possessed them without receiving the One to whom they pointed. The Reformed doctrine of irresistible grace is implicitly on display not as a comfort abstracted from history but as a claim pressing against the long human pattern of resistance — God persists in sending deliverers despite the pattern; His purposes will not be thwarted even by the stoning of His servants. Stephen’s death, framed explicitly as a mirror of Christ’s death, demonstrates the Reformed understanding of union with Christ in suffering: the martyr does not merely imitate Christ but participates in the same pattern of death-through-which-life-comes. Finally, the presence of Saul at the stoning — and the answer of Stephen’s dying prayer in Saul’s conversion — is a compressed display of sovereign grace: the chief persecutor becomes the chief apostle, and the martyr’s prayer is the human hinge point through which God’s purpose moves.

Main Takeaway

Your religious credentials cannot protect you from the claim of Christ — they were never meant to. Every deliverer God sent in Israel’s history was sent to bring you to *this* moment, face to face with the One they all prefigured. The question Stephen’s speech leaves ringing in the air is not theological but personal: Will you stop your ears and rush at the claim, or will you finally receive the Righteous One your whole heritage was pointing toward? And if you do receive Him — even in a world that reaches for stones — heaven is open, and Christ is standing.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the speech to a Bible survey lesson.** The most common homiletical failure with Acts 7 is treating the historical survey (vv. 2–50) as essentially catechetical content and the application (vv. 51–53) as a closing point. In reality, the survey *is* the argument — every episode is selected, shaped, and sequenced to build the indictment that lands in verses 51–53. If the preacher treats the historical material as background rather than as prosecutorial evidence, the entire logic of the speech is lost. Stephen is not giving a history lesson; he is prosecuting a case. Preach it that way.
- **Missing the Christological typology of Joseph and Moses.** Stephen’s use of Joseph (vv. 9–16) and Moses (vv. 17–43) is explicitly typological — they are types of Christ, the rejected deliverer who becomes the instrument of salvation. Verse 37 makes this explicit with the citation of Deuteronomy 18:15. If the preacher moves through these sections without connecting them to Christ, the chapter’s logic is fundamentally misread. The point is not merely that Israel rejected its leaders — the point is that every rejection of God’s appointed deliverer was a rehearsal for the rejection of the final Deliverer.
- **Applying the indictment only to the Sanhedrin or to unbelieving Israel.** Stephen’s charge — “you always resist the Holy Spirit” — is directed at a specific historical audience, but the text functions in the canon as a mirror for every subsequent reader, including the church. The pattern of preferring religious structures over living response to Christ’s claims is not a uniquely Jewish failure. The preacher who applies verses 51–53 only to “the Jews who rejected Jesus” has immunized the congregation against the text’s searching force. The question “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?” must land in the congregation’s own lap.
- **Treating Stephen’s martyrdom as heroic inspiration rather than gospel participation.** Stephen’s death is regularly preached as a model of courage under persecution — which it is. But if the preacher stops there, the martyrdom becomes moral example rather than gospel display. Stephen dies as Christ died (the verbal parallels to Luke 23 are deliberate), which means his death is not primarily about Stephen’s courage but about the shape of life in union with Christ. The martyr participates in the pattern of the crucified and risen Lord. Preach the martyrdom theologically, not merely heroically.
- **Ignoring Saul’s presence and its narrative function.** Verse 58 introduces Saul for the first time in Acts, and it does so at precisely the moment of maximum violence against the church. Luke is making a narrative point: the man who will become the gospel’s greatest missionary was present at and complicit in its first martyrdom. The preacher who does not develop this — and who does not connect Stephen’s

dying prayer to Saul's eventual conversion — has missed Luke's own framing of the scene. The answer to Stephen's "do not hold this sin against them" is Acts 9.

- **Decontextualizing the temple critique as anti-institutionalism.** Stephen's argument in verses 44–50 is sometimes read as a general critique of organized religion, institutional church, or formal worship structures — as though Stephen is endorsing a kind of free-form, building-free spirituality. This is an over-reading. Stephen's critique is not of divine institution per se (the tabernacle, which was divinely commanded, is treated positively). His critique is of the Sanhedrin's idolatry of the temple as a credential and a container for God. The application is not "church buildings are spiritually dangerous" but "every generation has a temptation to make its own religious structures into substitutes for the living Christ."