



As He Is

Psalm 31:1-5; John 14:1-14; Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.” The words are so comfortable to us they could easily lull us to sleep. “No one comes to the Father, except by me.” We hear in these words that our lives and eternities are secure, safe, and decided. Everything is OK, you can go back to sleep, now. Aren’t we missing something in being so assured, safe, and comfortable with these words of Jesus? After all, who is this Jesus, anyway? What is meant about Jesus being the way?

The disciples did not know what to make of Jesus’ words. “Where are you going?” they asked. “Show us the Father!” How clueless could they be? Certainly, we understand what he meant, right? Pray the prayer, state a belief that Jesus is God’s way of salvation, ask forgiveness, and go back to what you would be doing if you weren’t uncomfortable with being confused. Who is this Jesus, and what could he mean by being the way, truth, and life?

Stephen was one of the seven deacons set apart to handle the issues of making peace among the young Jerusalem church. As the others, however, he took on more than just seeing to an equitable distribution of financial assistance among the needy. He accepted his role in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the community at large. Sure, he did his duty on the church grievance board, but his life took on a much greater focus than dealing with internal squabbles. He ministered the message of Jesus Christ, even in the face of persecution.

I know, you thought that church squabbles could kill you, but being faithful to Jesus Christ was a much more dangerous occupation than making peace within the church walls. When some of the Jews found the security of their positions threatened, they had Stephen accused falsely of blasphemy. They riled up the populace painting Stephen as a threat to tradition, culture, and heritage, tacking on faith for good measure.

Luke records what our traditions call Stephen’s defense, but was much more a proclamation of his faith in Jesus Christ. He rehearsed Jewish faith and heritage, showed Jesus as the fulfillment of that heritage, and called them to recognize their guilt in ignoring God’s provision and redemption through Christ. Our expectations would have God step in and rescue Stephen from their anger and violence. On the other hand, Stephen had a very different expectation. He expected God to deal with him just as God had acted through Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. He chose to bow his life into following the example laid before him by the One he called The Way, Truth, and Life. “I see the Son of Man at God’s right hand!” Continuing to follow the way of Christ, he prayed, “Father, forgive them!” Set apart as both deacon and peacemaker, he made peace even in his death—faithfully following the example of Jesus Christ.

Stephen made God his shelter and refuge. As he had committed his life to God, so he trusted God with his living and dying. He understood that many would stumble upon the unexpected truths of the gospel, but he was committed to faithful stewardship of God’s word of grace, faith, and redemption.

Stephen understood that Jesus’ example was a model for teaching us how to live. As “The Way, Truth, and Life,” Jesus set before us the pattern and practice for our own living after the will and direction of God. Peter would later cast this as growing into salvation. Accepting the gospel and living in Christ is not a static destination, but a journey of experience living out the gospel.

Peter called it growing into salvation as living stones becoming part of a holy priesthood. As in the case of Stephen, Christian life is about becoming and allowing God to work through us to proclaim His deeds, identity, and will. We are called alongside Jesus as the preeminent example of becoming the living stones of God's building. It is not about our comfort, after all, it is about our being tasked with joining with Stephen as God's priesthood to the world.

If Jesus is the Way, he is more than the means to life with God. He is also the example of how that life plays out in action. The disciples did not quite get it. They still thought of Jesus as the means to an end. They wanted to distinguish the person of Jesus from the message he proclaimed. They wanted the good news to speak of blessing for them at another's expense. They could not even grasp yet that Jesus was the visible expression of the Father, nor that he had been teaching them the way to God in both word and in his living example.

Love meant loving as Jesus. Forgiving meant forgiving as Jesus. Grace meant receiving and valuing others after the example of Jesus. Experiencing the messianic reign meant living as Jesus had exemplified and told them to live. The very fabric of their lives was to be transformed into lives lived as God's new priestly construction. They were no longer individuals wrapped up in themselves, their own issues, aims, and dreams. Their identity and function were to flow out of being integral parts of God's presence and action in the world.

Their lives were to become the appropriate, acceptable, spiritual sacrifices of their new priestly function, calling, and identity. This new life and existence requires growth, development, and a constant active progress. There is no final state of having arrived. There is no platform of sufficient growth. There is no level of achievement we might equate with retiring from a career. We have not reached the end of the journey until we have so joined in the life of the Father as Christ Jesus was in the Father, and the Father in Christ Jesus.

Jesus' words we so glibly quote were words of comfort to the disciples he was about to leave behind. They were comfort in that they spoke of an eternal fellowship with God. They were much more, however, than simply comfort. They were also a call, challenge, and command to continue into the example set before them.

They were a stretch for limited minds; "Do you still not know me?" I am preparing for you. You are not abandoned. This is who I am. You will be cared for in eternity, now get on with the task I leave with you. Live according to the pattern and way of my example. Become my presence in the world as I have been the presence of God in your lives. Live out the truth I have presented before you.

When Jesus called the disciples to believe, that calls was to translate into living by the example they had seen in Jesus' living. Confidence in Christ and faith in Christ require that we live as Christ.

So much for the gospel as a namby-pamby lullaby to keep us at ease. It is rather a call to a much more challenging confidence. Growing into our salvation, we are to exhibit such confident trust in Christ Jesus that we are fully willing to live by the example he has set before us. Like Stephen, we are to present our lives in witness to the sufficiency of the way, truth, and life in Jesus Christ, becoming as He is, even in giving up our own life concerns that others might live. Are we ready to become as He is, or shall we just drift on back to sleep?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*