

As Christians, our goal should be to glorify God by becoming more like Jesus. Christianity isn't about behavior modification, but about total transformation of identity, character, and purpose. Romans 8:29, 8:15, and Galatians 4:6 tell us that in Christ our identity is as children of God. And our character should be full of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), which is the résumé of Christ, the result of becoming more like Him. But being imitators of Jesus Christ is often a struggle, and this shouldn't be a surprise (Galatians 5:17). Our sinful nature no longer reigns over us, and it is being crucified on the cross. However, it isn't completely eliminated yet, so in the meantime it struggles against the new life and the Spirit within us. The tendencies of the flesh often emerge without us even being aware of them, especially when life is demanding and full of obstacles and stress.

Stephen is a good example of being Christ-like in the most stressful of situations, when he was being stoned. He shows us what it looks like to be like Christ. In Acts 6:8 we see that Stephen is full of God's grace and power. This is followed by a description of his actions, which include healing, signs and wonders, and boldly proclaiming Jesus. He was a difference maker. However, Stephen wasn't an apostle. So we too, whether or not we are in church leadership, are called to likewise be difference makers, to influence others for Christ. We must all realize our priesthood in Jesus (1 Peter 2:9). People should see God glorified in you. Christian life isn't just an insurance policy for eternity; it's a calling. We are saved for a purpose, to make a difference in this broken world, not necessarily by fixing the world by ourselves, but by leading people to the One who will fix things in the end.

We also see in Acts 6:15 that Stephen is described as having the face like that of an angel. When Moses was described this way, it was because his face radiated as it reflected the glory of God. In 2 Samuel, when David was described this way, it was because of his wise reign. Furthermore, when angels are described in the Bible, they are powerful and often frightening. So being like an angel is a description of power and boldness rather than beauty and adorability. To be Christ-like means to be filled with His power, to be fearless and even intimidating to the enemies of God. This is why the Sanhedrin were intimidated by Stephen. When we accept the

fullness of God's grace, and realize that we are totally accepted by God, then we can be fearless since it no longer matters what others think. What God thinks is what matters most. In contrast, the Sanhedrin were full of fear about what the people thought and about losing their status and power.

Finally, Stephen is described as being full of the Spirit (Acts 7:55). His trial and execution parallels that of Jesus. This isn't surprising as Matthew 10 predicts that Jesus' disciples would be persecuted as He was. However, Stephen was able to say almost the same words that Christ did as He died (Acts 7:59-60). This amazing Christ-likeness was only possible because he was filled with the Spirit. This is the ultimate example of bearing the fruit of the Spirit amidst tough circumstances.

But how was Stephen able to be this much like Christ? Can we become like Christ just by copying what Stephen did at every moment of our lives? It would be near impossible. Even Stephen wasn't always like this. During his defense he said some things perhaps in ways he shouldn't have, which angered the Sanhedrin even more. The Bible isn't about all the things we have to do to be like Christ, but it's about what Jesus has done for us to make us like Him. It's not because Stephen was merely trying to be like Christ that he was able to love those who killed him, but it's because he saw Jesus (vv. 55-56). By seeing Him, having His presence in your life, and experiencing Him, you become more like Him. We shouldn't settle for the omnipresence of God, but rather seek the manifested presence of God through Jesus, who gives us perseverance and victory. When we see Him, we are made more like Him, and others see Him in us. But seeing Jesus isn't forced. The gospel is something that happens to you by God's grace.

And when we see Jesus, we must see Him as He revealed Himself, not as we would like to see Him. Jesus is the ascended King over all. Yet in His position of power, He gives us power. He is present with us to strengthen us (Matthew 28:20). When we suffer, He treats it as if He were suffering (Acts 9:4). In Acts 7:56 we see Jesus is standing rather than sitting (which is the usual description) at the right hand of God. As Stephen suffers, Jesus stands for him. When we suffer, Jesus guarantees comfort, which in turn we should give to others as we imitate Christ (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). So keep your eyes on Jesus. Have a relationship with Him. Be reminded of the gospel and never stop seeking after Him.