

“How should we treat our prophets?”

Scripture – [Acts 6:8-15](#)

I have always loved the story of Stephen. The thought of being full of grace and power inspires me; too often people err perhaps to one or the other. Stephen was full of the Spirit and he lived life boldly. In many regards, Stephen was like the prophets of the Old Testament.

Now before I suggest how Stephen is like a prophet, we need to be sure that we understand the makeup of a prophet. Too often when we think of prophets, we think of people who predict the future. And even though it is true that prophets did make predictions regarding the future, such predictions were only a very small part of what prophets did. For the most part, prophets were simply people who could see clearly that the people of God were not who they were called to be, and in response to the peoples' lack of faithfulness, the prophets called the people of God back to covenant faithfulness.

The Israelites, for the most part, did not treat their prophets very well. The kings and priests the prophets attempted to hold accountable, often slandered the prophets, imprisoned them in odd places (like cisterns!), chased them about the countryside, and put many to death. But for the most part, the people simply chose to ignore the prophets and dismiss them as fools.

Stephen is like a prophet in that he sees how God's people have missed the single greatest fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, the coming of the Messiah, and he attempts to call them to embrace Jesus and be who God has called them to be. But the Israelites respond to Stephen by first slandering him, and when that does not work, stoning him to death.

Stanley Hauerwas, in one of his many books, made the comment that the church has not treated her prophets any better than the Israelites. The church's prophets were (and are) people who have a clear vision of who God's people are called to be and a clear vision of who God's people actually are. And then, in prophetic manners, the church's prophets call the church back to who the church was called to be.

I think that many of the early Anabaptists were prophets. They did not set out to start a new church, but rather to reform the church they were a part of. Michael and Margaretha Sattler, and others, called on the church to be faithful to God's vision for the church. The church, unfortunately, slandered them and put many to death.

The church needs her prophets. Prophets serve the important purpose of helping us see the difference between who we are and who we are called to be. But how do we treat our prophets today? Granted, we don't put them to death and that is good! But do we listen to them? Or do we dismiss them as irrelevant idealists who are out of touch with "real life"?

Let me suggest that we listen. Now Paul does warn us to be on guard for false prophets, and we should be on guard for such. But listening is the place where discernment begins, and so I want to encourage us to listen.

