

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, **the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul**. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

And **Saul approved of their killing him**. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But **Saul began to destroy the church**. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went (Acts 7:57 to 8:4 NIV).

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The witnesses executed Stephen by stoning him to death. Why did they lay their coats at the feet of Saul? So that no one would steal their coats during the execution? Something cultural happened here that is difficult to know for certain. Nonetheless, many scholars think that Saul was given the responsibility to carry out the decision of the Sanhedrin to execute Stephen in order to demonstrate his zeal to protect the Law of Moses. And Saul did not disappoint the Sanhedrin.

That same day Saul began to destroy the church – but not everyone in the church was impacted by Saul’s zeal to protect the Law of Moses. The apostles were not touched! If Saul and the Sanhedrin were serious about stopping this new teaching from Stephen (no temple, no Law of Moses), then they should have eliminated the leadership first. But the apostles were not touched!

Why didn't Saul go "from house to house" and "drag off" the apostles? Because the apostles did **NOT** immediately buy into this new gospel that Stephen was teaching. James, Peter and the other apostles obeyed the Law of Moses and worshipped in the Temple long after the death and resurrection of Jesus and long after the martyrdom of Stephen. Years later, Peter needed a special vision from heaven to convince him that the Law of Moses required a new perspective (Acts 10:1 to 11:18).

So, only those in the early church that were following this new teaching from Stephen (no temple, no Law of Moses) were being arrested and persecuted by Saul and the Sanhedrin. Luke referred to these persecuted believers in Acts 11:19-26 (just after Peter violated the Law of Moses when he ate with Gentiles in Acts 10:1 to 11:18!):

Now those who had been scattered by **the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed** traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of

people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch (Act 11:19-26 NIV).

Luke told us that Stephen infected Saul of Tarsus with this new gospel (no temple, no Law of Moses), that Saul reacted by overseeing his execution, that Saul persecuted only those followers of Jesus that also taught this new gospel (no temple, no Law of Moses), that Saul accepted this new gospel on the road to Damascus in his remarkable conversion experience, that Saul immediately began to teach this new gospel (no temple, no Law of Moses) that he had tried to eradicate, and that years later Saul (now Paul) defended his gospel (no temple, no Law of Moses) against attacks from all sorts of Jews, even those Jews following Jesus but still obeying the Law of Moses and worshipping in the temple.