

For First Southern Baptist Church on November 29, 2020

Culture Change and Conflict

I hope you had a great Thanksgiving holiday this past week. We have much to be thankful for and the general disposition of all of us who have received abundant grace should be one of gratitude. Before we jump into Acts today, let me share a couple of quick announcements. I want to remind you that after the service, which we're still planning to have in person on Dec. 6th, we will have quick budget meeting. This is to discuss the 2021 budget, so this is your opportunity to ask questions and make suggestions. This should help the budget discussion at the members gathering, our last business meeting of the year, move along a little quicker. If you can, please plan on staying for the meeting. Also, I had intended for you all to meet a friend who is an aspiring church planter. Chapin Jones and his wife Mandy, are planning to plant in Selinsgrove. He was going to share his vision for that work and preach this morning, but due to COVID we are hoping to reschedule for some time in January. Finally, it's Advent season. We're planning to jump into Advent and looking forward to Christmas as we gather next week, but I wanted to take a second to remind you all that is also officially Lottie Moon Christmas offering season. I'll share more about Lottie Moon next week, but would you begin praying about contributing to this special collection? Now, let's pick up where we left off in Acts last week.

In Acts 19, Paul arrived in Ephesus and began to bear witness about Jesus. When he ran into some conflict with the Jews in the synagogue, he moved into the Greek lecture hall next door and continued to preach and teach faithfully for over two years. Luke tells us that the whole country heard the gospel as a result of this season of Paul's ministry. We also saw how Christianity resonated loud and clear against the practical magic and syncretistic religion of the day which was hollow and powerless in comparison. The direct result of Paul's ministry was the repudiation of idolatry, magic charms, incantations, and other empty religious practices that had no real power next to the Living God who powerfully displayed his glory, love, and grace through the Holy Spirit in Ephesus. Today, we're going to look at Acts 19:21-41 and we'll see how the gospel, while advancing, drew Paul and the early church into conflict with the world.

“(21) Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome.” (22) And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.

(23) About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. (24) For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. (25) These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, “Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. (26) And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. (27) And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.”

(28) When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (29) So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. (30) But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. (31) And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater. (32)

Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. (33) Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defense to the crowd. (34) But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

(35) And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky? (36) Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. (37) For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. (38) If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. (39) But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. (40) For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." (41) And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly."

The "now after these events" in verse 21 is a direct literary bridge to the first half of the chapter we looked at last week. After Paul arrived in Ephesus, after his instruction of the disciples of John the Baptist, after his preaching in the synagogue and moving next door, after the many miraculous works pointing to the validity of the gospel, after the Jewish exorcists were humiliated by trying to use Jesus' name like a magic charm, after the whole nation heard the gospel and about the exorcists and learned to fear the Lord while burning the tools of their pagan religion, after all of that Paul resolved to go to Jerusalem. This verse connects us to the immediate, previous context; however, Luke is also foreshadowing the future trajectory of Paul's story. He was resolutely set to go to Jerusalem, and hoping to continue on to Rome. We'll see the rest of this journey unfold all the way to the end of Acts. Paul's plan on this trip, which he mentions in Romans 15:25-31, was to bring a financial gift to the struggling church in Jerusalem, which he hoped to collect from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia. His ultimate hope is to then go to Rome and hopefully on to Spain to continue to spearhead pioneer mission efforts further West. We see in verse 22 that he sends Timothy and Erastus ahead to prepare the churches for his visit.

In verse 23, we see a conflict that arose which is the heart of the rest of the historical narrative of chapter 19. In verse 24, a silversmith named Demetrius gathers the craftsmen throughout the city and incites a riot against Paul and the Christians. The silver shrines mentioned were miniatures of the temple Artemis and they were used to set up idolatrous shrines in individual homes or purchased and given as offerings to Artemis at the temple of Artemis, itself. This temple was the glory and renown of the city. Artemis was considered the mother goddess of all of Asia, where Ephesus was located, and this temple was the heart of her worship. Consider that Demetrius saw the expansion of the church and the triumph of the good news of Jesus as detrimental to the whole system of worship in their city and culture. Specifically, in verse 26 he mentioned how Paul was saying, and ultimately proving, that their gods and idols were not gods at all. The good news had taken root and spread throughout the whole country, transforming the people and culture of Asia. People had stopped worshipping idols and they had stopped buying idols to such an extent, because of the evangelistic work of Paul and the Ephesian church, that these idol-makers sincerely feared they would be out of a job. So, because their own economic interests were at stake, Demetrius appeals to the civic, religious, and nationalistic pride to incite the people into a riot.

In true mob fashion, verses 28-29 show that people turned out angry, crying out the greatness of Artemis, and filling the city with confusion and chaos. In their stampede, unable to locate Paul, they grabbed

Gaius and Aristarchus, Christians who worked and traveled with Paul and dragged them into the city's theater. Gaius is relatively unknown and unmentioned in the New Testament, but Aristarchus was a Thessalonian who regularly traveled with Paul and is mentioned the next chapter, as well as Colossians 4, and Philemon 24. The theater in Ephesus at this time was a massive complex that scholars estimate might have held 20-25 thousand people at once. It was used for large civic gathering and in the event of a city emergency. This riot was not a little demonstration. Paul was restrained from addressing the crowd in verse 30 by other Christians who were concerned for his safety. Notice that in verse 31, even some of the Asiarchs were urging Paul to stay away. These men served a role that made them prominent city leaders in Ephesus and they were likely also responsible for leading and overseeing the imperial cult of Rome in Asia. The text is clear that these pagan Greeks, who are not indicated to be Christians, were Paul's friends and asked him to stay away likely out of concern for his well-being and the chance that his presence would escalate the riot.

Notice how verse 32 captured the chaos of this moment. No one was entirely sure why they were angry and yelling together. In the next verse, a Jew named Alexander was put forward to speak to the crowd. It's not clear why he was chosen, who he was, or what he was intended to say. It seems likely that he was put forth to defend Judaism and disassociate the Jews of the city from the Christians whom the Ephesians are rioting against. Though the Jews and the Christians knew there was a distinction between themselves, the broader world wouldn't recognize this difference until the early second century when the Jews make a declared and official break with the Christians, and even then, it was some time before people knew they were different. When the crowd realized Alexander was Jewish, they shouted him down, crying out the greatness of Artemis for two hours.

The narrative reaches its climax in verse 35, when the town clerk takes the stage. This unnamed clerk was the chief administrative officer of Ephesus, something like the mayor, and also the Roman provincial administrator. Rather than appealing to their civic, religious, and nationalistic pride to incite anger, he does so to calm them. He reassured the crowd in that moment by reminding them that Artemis was famous the world over and their great city was in no real danger of losing its prestige. His chief concern is that they would act rashly which would bring the greater Roman authorities down on them, which might lead to a restriction of their liberties and self-governance. Don't miss that in verse 37 and 38 he vindicated Paul and the Christians by stating that they had not committed any actual crimes, and if there was an actual crime, they should use the appropriate legal channels to bring charges. They could appeal to the Roman proconsuls or the city magistrates in the regular assembly. Notice in verses 39-40, he essentially said that if there was any crime committed that they should be concerned about, it was not the activity of the Christians, but the rioting of the Ephesians. His words had a cooling effect, and in verse 41, the crowds dispersed. After the riot settled, Paul departed on his journey which we'll get into after the holidays.

The narrative of Acts 19, and this passage in particular, speak to us today. So, allow me to suggest a couple of practical ways this text should shape our lives today:

1. The primary thing that this biblical, historical moment reminds us of is that bearing witness to Jesus will draw us in to conflict with the world. This isn't a glorification of that conflict, as I see in some parts of our 21st century, American Christianity. We are not to be pugnacious, obnoxious, controversy mongers, but rather we should be striving to live at peace with all peoples in so much as it is in our ability as in Hebrews 12:14. Having said this, Christians who serve the risen Christ are at war. The 1 Peter tells us that our enemy the devil is a roaming lion seeking someone to devour. Paul calls us in Ephesians 6 to put on the armor of God and be prepared to stand against the principalities and powers of evil. Brothers and sisters, stay awake and be vigilant to fight the good fight, which is not a battle of power, authority, and political

control, but rather a fight of prayer, faith, and love. Though we have a real and deadly enemy and the world may be stacked against us, God will not falter or fail. He has already won the war and we stand victorious in Christ because though we were once enemies of God, enslaved to sin, we have been redeemed from sin and death and reconciled to him through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Though the nations rage, the King reigns now and forevermore. Don't be asleep, but do rest assured in Jesus.

2. Consider too, how Paul's witness to the Ephesians was as person invested in the people and city in which he lived. For the two plus years that he lived in Ephesus, he made friends, he got to know people, and he was a part of civic life. It's not a main point, but even pagan religious officials counted Paul among their friends. For too long too many of us, fearing rightly the influence of sin and the threat of worldly culture creeping in, have walled ourselves into the perceived safety of Christian community and separated ourselves from our city and culture. Yet the example of Jesus, and specifically Paul in Acts 19, is oriented outward toward others. Through real relationships with neighbors, city officials, religious leaders, and community members, the Christian church in the 1st century spoke lovingly and boldly about the grace of God in Jesus Christ and saw the work of the Holy Spirit, breathing new life. If we're going to be faithful witnesses, as we've seen exemplified all throughout Acts by many brave saints, we have to go outside the walls and invest in our neighbors and our community, too. It is a profound evidence of the truth of the gospel when Christians are good friends and loving neighbors to their community.
3. Finally, friends, Paul and the Ephesian church profoundly transformed their culture by faithfully sharing the gospel. They didn't campaign for a specific candidate. They didn't necessarily advocate specific laws. Their focus wasn't on the tools, institutions, and mechanisms of the world to shape their society to look more like God's Kingdom. They got busy doing the work of God's Kingdom and the Holy Spirit radically altered their society. And listen, I'm saying that having just been considerably angered reading responses to the recent Supreme Court ruling which struck down New York's overly restrictive guidelines for religious groups concerning COVID. There are lots of reasonable things for us to be concerned about and work for to love our neighbors well in our day, yet consider how the faithful lives of the Ephesian Christians lived in obedience to and bearing witness to Christ, more than anything, threatened the prominence and power of sin and idolatry in all of Asia! America doesn't necessarily need to be made great again, or a green new deal. It needs faithful, loving Christians who live to make the glory of God known and apparent everywhere. Rather than lamenting the evil so prevalent in our society, let's get busy making disciples and we'll see what God can do when his people make sharing the gospel their greatest priority. Our prayer as we go: "May the church so profoundly love and serve God and their neighbor that sin and idolatry lose all power, influence, and appeal before the might, majesty, and love of Jesus Christ."