

Acts 19:11-41, No. 40
“The Demonstration of the Holy Spirit”
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Paul’s ministry had begun in Ephesus. Whether at its beginning Paul knew he would remain in Ephesus some three years we cannot say, but the success the Holy Spirit gave to his ministry meant he couldn’t leave.

Text Comment

- v.11 It is important to note that Luke himself describes these miraculous healings as *extraordinary*. That is, these were extraordinary even for miracles! Something a bit like this had happened a few times in Jesus’ ministry and perhaps once in Peter’s (Acts 5:15-16), but not this scale. This was unprecedented both in the nature of the miracles and in the number of them.
- v.13 Strange as it may seem, this is evidence of the objectivity of Paul’s miracles. Even charlatans wanted to get in on the action. If Jesus could do it for Paul perhaps he could do it for them as well.
- v.16 The humor of the scene adds to its point. There were lots of magicians in those days who invoked all manner of gods, often many in the same incantation to make sure that the right one got mentioned. Pagans invoked the name of the God of the Jews and here the Jews used the name of Jesus. But they borrowed an unfamiliar weapon and shot themselves in the foot.
- v.17 We must never lose sight of either the undeniably supernatural character of biblical miracles or their self-authenticating objectivity. Nowadays we hear of miracles being performed by this TV preacher or that, but invariably they lack these two identifying marks of the truly miraculous: 1) that they cannot be explained in any other way than by the power of God; and 2) their objectivity, they can be and were witnessed by others who could attest to what they saw.
- v.21 Paul’s immediate plans were shaped by his larger strategy. He was at this time planning to return to Jerusalem to bring the large sum of money that he had been collecting from his Gentile congregations for the relief of poor Christians in the Jewish capital. Luke has not mentioned the collection, though, of course, he knew about it, as we learn in 24:17. In Romans 15 he will tell the Romans that he then planned to head west to Spain in Romans 15:24-25.
- v.22 On this minor note about Timothy and Erastus hangs a tale. As we learn from 1 Corinthians, Paul had sent Timothy to Corinth to find out how the church had received his “hard letter,” the letter we know as 1 Corinthians, the letter in which Paul had rebuked the church for its disunity and for its accommodation to the culture’s sinful

practices. News had reached him in Ephesus during those several years of the problems in Corinth and he had addressed those problems in his first letter. But he was desperate to know how his letter had been received and if the believers in Corinth had taken his admonitions to heart. Paul, himself heading for Corinth, would eventually meet Timothy, returning from Corinth, in Macedonia, what is now the northern part of Greece. He was relieved because Timothy's report was very positive. 2 Corinthians was written from Macedonia just weeks or a few months before Paul would arrive in Corinth himself. He would remain in Corinth that winter before sailing to Jerusalem in the early spring.

- v.23 We are used to the Jews fomenting opposition to Paul's ministry, as they had in Corinth and in virtually every city in which Paul had conducted his ministry. But here the opposition arises not from the Jewish quarter but from the Gentile.

- v.26 Francis Schaeffer warned against the idolatry of personal peace and affluence – the gods of our modern world – that blind people to the larger issues of life. There is nothing new about that. What worried Demetrius was not whether the gods he was making were real but whether his livelihood would suffer from so many Ephesian idolaters becoming Christians. That he was worried enough to take action is evidence of the influence of the gospel in Ephesus.

- v.27 Not everyone in Ephesus would be as concerned about a loss of revenue in the silversmith trade, so it was important to appeal to other considerations. Ephesians were proud of their great temple and their association with Artemis, one of the most important goddesses in the Greek pantheon (the Romans identified her with Diana). Paul and his crowd, in other words, was spitting on our great city, which is to say he was spitting on us! It is the sort of argument politicians use all the time today!

- v.28 Think of the great mobs of middle-easterners we have seen on the television in recent years crying out, "*Allāhu Akbar!*" One commentator aptly observes that the only thing heathenism could do against Paul was to shout itself hoarse. [Haenchen, 578]

- v.29 They no doubt rushed down the Arcadian Way, the main thoroughfare of the city, eleven meters wide, paved with marble, and colonnaded, leading from the harbor to the theater. [Stott, 309] The theater has been excavated and is estimated to have held some 25,000 people.

- v.31 The reference to Asiarchs is another of those details that was once thought to be a mistake, as Asiarchs were not supposed to exist until the end of the first century, but inscriptional evidence now confirms that, once again, Luke was an accurate reporter. Asiarchs were civic officials drawn from the wealthy and aristocratic inhabitants of the province. That they were friends of Paul is further evidence of how influential his ministry in Ephesus had been. [Peterson, 547-548]

- v.32 Such generalized resentment is a feature of mobs, different people participating for different reasons but all angry about something. There was probably some anti-Jewish feeling as well, since they also condemned idolatry and the worshipping of images.

- v.33 The Jews apparently wanted to make clear that they had nothing to do with the Christians. [Peterson, 548-549]
- v.35 The reference apparently is to a meteor that had fallen nearby and was taken to have been sent by Artemis or, perhaps, to bear her image in some fashion.
- v.41 The city clerk was obviously an intelligent man and just as obviously more concerned for civic order than he was with the concerns of Demetrius. His first argument was that no one could displace Artemis; she could easily take care of herself. They had nothing to fear. Second, Paul's friends Gaius and Aristarchus were guilty of nothing, certainly not sacrilege or blasphemy. Third, there was a proper way to adjudicate the dispute and legal remedies were available if, in fact, they had just cause to take these men to court. Indeed, there were separate legal avenues for both private actions (what we would call civil suits) and criminal indictments. Luke was well informed concerning Ephesian legal proceedings at that time. And, finally, the Romans did not look with favor on civil disorder and these folk were in danger of bringing down upon the city the wrath of the Roman governor.

In the event the town clerk's viewpoint prevailed and everyone went home. Luke is interested in this episode no doubt in part because it further indicated that the Roman state found no cause of action against Christianity either in Corinth or in Ephesus. A sect that had Asiarchs for friends obviously posed no threat to the Roman state. Left free to do its work the gospel continued to advance.

As so often in Acts, the narrative we have read reveals a pattern. Though the events Luke has recorded were specific to Paul's ministry in Ephesus, they are also indicative of what always happens when the Holy Spirit is at work and when the gospel encounters unbelief in the world. We do not witness miracles today, for example, and we may never witness a public riot provoked by the fact that so many people are becoming Christians, but there is nevertheless something timeless about Luke's narrative here in Acts 19. Let me show you what I mean. When the Holy Spirit is at work certain things happen and so when he is powerfully at work, as he was in Ephesus, those things, those results of the Spirit's presence and power, are still easier to see.

I. In the first place, there will always be the fear of God and the conviction of sin.

We read of this in Ephesus in vv. 17-18. When a person knows himself or herself in the presence of the living God and no longer his or her idols, he or she cannot avoid the recognition of the chasm that separates him from the holiness of God or the sin that God's holiness has revealed in her life. This has been a characteristic feature of gospel experience so far in Acts. At Pentecost we read that the congregation that witnessed the power of the Spirit and heard Peter's sermon "were cut to the heart and said to Peter... what must we do to be saved?" [2:37] They knew themselves for the first time guilty sinners before a holy God. They were afraid. The Philippian jailer likewise fell to his knees, crying out, "What must I do to be saved?" There is in the encounter with the divine presence, immediately and intuitively, a recognition of the majesty and holiness of God and the sinfulness and unworthiness of oneself.

In times of great gospel advance, accordingly, this experience is characteristic. Jonathan Edwards described the later months of 1734 and all of 1735, when the rains of the Spirit fell on the town of Northampton, Mass, this way:

“...never so full of love, never so full of joy, and yet so full of distress as it was then. ... Men have been taken from a loose and careless way of living, and seized with strong convictions of their guilt and misery...” [*Works*, I, 348, 350]

In Ephesus and in Northampton this conviction of sin and ill-desert took the form of public confession of sin. It was not enough to feel in one’s heart privately the wrong of one’s life, the moral failure, the guilt before God and man, one was compelled to confess it to others, to make a breast of the truth one now saw so clearly. In Ephesus, we read, “...many came confessing and divulging their practices.” Under conviction of sin they wanted no longer to hide who and what they had been. To do so would have been simply another sin, another deceit, another act of hypocrisy and the last thing they wanted was to make themselves worse than they already were and now knew themselves to be. When human beings start reckoning with themselves honestly – as they do under the influence of the Holy Spirit – they do not like what they see and seeing God at the same time – God as he actually is, the God whose eyes are too pure to behold iniquity – the first thing they think to do is to admit their moral problem instead of hiding it as they always had done before.

II. Second, and precisely for that reason, there is formed in the hearts of people a great admiration for Jesus Christ.

We read that it was so in Ephesus in v. 17. *The name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.* Why? Well because Jesus Christ is the only answer and the perfect answer to our moral problem, the only one who can overcome our chronic moral failure. If you come face to face with your sin, finally acknowledge the ugliness of so much of your inner and outer life – the pride, the pettiness, the selfishness, the disobedience, all those things you so much want no one else ever to see or to know – and reckon with the guilt you must bear before the judgment of God, the one who came into the world *to save his people from their sins* is going to become the chief object of your admiration and of your gratitude.

You remember, perhaps, that famous passage in John Bunyan’s spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. It was a time of salvation in Bedford, England but Bunyan himself was not yet a Christian. But he was thinking about it; he was curious. And one morning he found himself on a street of the town and as he plied his trade he found himself listening to some women whose morning work was done and who were sitting on a stoop in the sunshine talking together about spiritual things. And as he listened to that conversation he realized that these women were talking about things he knew nothing about: “how God had visited their souls with his love in the Lord Jesus.” And, he said, “they spoke as if joy itself did make them speak.”

Edwards tells us in his narrative of such Ephesian days in Northampton that people “would spend the time in talking of the excellency and dying love of Jesus Christ, the glory of the way of salvation, [and] the sweetness of Christ’s perfections...” Well that sounds very much like

what Luke has described in v. 17. Whether in Ephesus in the first century, Bedford in the 17th, Northampton in the 18th, or in a great many place in the 20th and 21st centuries, people who are conscious of their need for a Savior – which conviction is the first work of the Holy Spirit – find themselves preoccupied with the majesty of Jesus Christ. This is what Jesus had said the Comforter would do: throw a bright light on Jesus Christ and his power to save us from our sins. When the Spirit is at work Jesus Christ becomes great in a person's estimation; very great; impossibly great! Greater than anyone else has ever been in that person's mind and heart.

III. Third, and precisely for those two reasons: conviction of sin and esteem for Jesus Christ, there will be repentance and new obedience.

What was remarkable about the Ephesian conversions, so many of them as there were, was that they produced a radical change of life, so radical the entire city took note. Signaling their own determination to make a clean break with their sinful past, those who had practiced magic arts – a common practice in Ephesus – as an act of public repentance and consecration came together and made a public display of burning their scrolls, the books that contained the various incantations that would have been recited by these sorcerers.

To be sure, to see or hear what had happened to Sceva's seven sons, how Jesus had made a mockery of their supposed power to exorcise demons, made it still easier for them to give it all up. They knew they were leaving nothing behind but a charade. Still, that is what always happens when the Spirit is at work in a human heart. It is not enough to confess that one had been wrong and had lived badly. In gratitude for salvation, in love for God and Christ, and out of a desire to live to God's praise, a new and very different life is built on the ruins of the old one.

Men save themselves if they can when they find themselves in peril. The Spirit also saves men and women from peril. But he is not only interested in rescuing them from judgment and death, he is determined to transform them into the human beings they were always meant to be. And his power is such over their hearts that great changes are welcomed even at great cost.

These men would have made their living as magicians. To burn their scrolls was no small thing. What did their wives say about the loss of income this would entail? But they could not do otherwise and knowing Jesus as they now did, they were sure he would see them right. Missionaries in India used to make Hindu converts eat beef right away. It was a way to ensure that their commitment to Christ was real and that they understood themselves how complete had to be the break with their past. A person who wants to be a Christian but hesitates to leave behind some of his sinful past, for whatever reason, -- a chronic problem in Christian history -- is being rebuked by this history. If in Christ all things become new, then it should be obvious to any observer that the new believer has left his or her past behind and has done so because he or she *wants to*.

There is an anecdote from the life of George Whitefield, a Paul like figure of the 18th century's Great Awakening. Whitefield encountered on the road a man who was driving a cart while very obviously inebriated. When the man recognized Whitefield he called out, "Oh, Mr. Whitefield, is that you? I'm glad to see you. I'm one of your converts." "Yes," said Whitefield. "I see you

are one of *my* converts, but not one of the Lord's." [In William Burns, *Revival Sermons*, 161-162]

Coming to faith in Christ is always and inevitably a matter of dying to sin and rising to new life. When the Spirit of Holiness is at work, holiness is produced. That alteration in life should be noticeable at the beginning and all along the way.

IV. Fourth, and finally, the work of the Spirit will produce opposition.

Wherever the gospel went in those heady days of the first century people responded in faith and were transformed. But, at the same time, there were others who furiously and bitterly opposed its influence. We have read of and considered this opposition repeatedly in Acts to this point. Paul was stoned on one occasion, imprisoned, at least briefly, on another. He was hurried out of other towns to avoid violent opposition. And here in Ephesus some of his companions were grabbed by a mob and dragged into the theater. A great crowd gathered hungry for blood.

The work of the Holy Spirit is and must inevitably be a divisive influence in human life. It could not be otherwise. One has only to review what it is that Christians believe to understand why it must disrupt and divide and destroy, even as it heals and saves. The Spirit and the gospel have adversaries, determined to oppose their influence at every turn. So much is this the case that one sure sign of the Spirit's presence is hostility to the gospel and the Christian faith on the part of the populace as a whole. So it was in Ephesus and so it has been ever since.

I have sometimes mentioned J. Oliver Buswell to you since he is something of a hero of mine. A man of action – the youngest chaplain in the U.S. Army in the First World War, wounded in action and decorated with both the bronze and the silver star – the youngest president of a college in the United States when he became president of Wheaton, a college that rose dramatically in enrollment, in academic reputation, and in influence during his tenure, and later one of the prominent theologians of American conservative Christianity. I grew up a stone's throw from the Buswell home and, as a boy, often encountered him outside chopping wood – he was a vigorous man into his old age – or walking the campus of Covenant Theological Seminary. I was too young to study under him, but he cut an impressive figure in my boyhood. *But Dr. Buswell might never have been.*

Dr. Buswell's father was also a minister and at one point in his ministry labored in an area of northern Wisconsin that was largely unevangelized and unchurched. Quite on his own and without denominational support he moved there in 1899. As people were converted and gathered into the new church, the business of the saloon keepers began to suffer, much as that of the silversmiths in Ephesus had suffered. Men began giving their money to the work of the church instead of spending it on drink. Mellon, Wisconsin, where the Buswells lived had 600 inhabitants and about 60 saloons that served the nearby villages, farms, and lumber mills.

Some strong hints were given to the preacher that he ought to leave town for his safety and that of his family. Once walking down the street Mr. Buswell heard the crack of a rifle and a bullet, fired from an alley across the street whizzed by his head. He was not intimidated. He began building a home a few miles out of town. One day the head carpenter, who was approximately

the same size as Mr. Buswell, had gone to town and just returned. He was dressed in street clothes, standing next to the missionary who was dressed in overalls. A rifle shot rang out and the carpenter fell dead, certainly murdered by mistake. The bullet was meant for Mr. Buswell. Later, having completed their home, Mr. Buswell set off on an evangelistic tour through the nearby lumber camps. While away the news reached him that his home had burned down. His wife had managed to get his four sons out in time but into a night in which the temperature fell to 40 degrees below zero! It was arson and the story was reported in the national press.

Whether in first century Ephesus or 20th century America the story is and will be the same. Commitment to Jesus Christ is a radically transformative act. It not only revolutionizes a person's life in heart, speech, and behavior, by doing so it invariably impinges on the lives of others. The Christian who burns his magic books in so doing condemns those who continue to use theirs. Too many Christians create social and economic dislocations. Some years ago in Australia so many became Christians in one town that crime disappeared and several policemen lost their jobs! We understand this. But there is nothing we can do about it. It is the very nature of our faith to create such divisions and disruptions. It is no accident that throughout the ages the martyrs have been, as a rule, a higher class of Christian, outspoken devotees of Jesus, eager to live their lives in conformity to his will. That is why they were singled out for punishment, because they were so obviously and publicly representatives of this faith so deeply resented by those who did not believe.

We can and should, of course, treat those who are opposed to the gospel and its influence as kindly and generously as we can, in the same kind and generous way the Lord has treated us when we were his enemies. But we cannot avoid the opposition any more than Paul could. So much is this the case that it is an indictment of the church if it does not suffer such opposition. All that means is that the church is not, in fact, convinced of its sin, not in fact extolling Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, not in fact repenting of its sins and practicing a new obedience, and not doing all of this publicly.

Now let us turn this light upon ourselves. If this is what happens when the Spirit of God is at work, in Christian hearts, in the church, and through Christians in the world, is this what is happening to us? Do I fear God and hate my sin; am I turning from that sin to obedience; is Christ extolled in my life; and has my life provoked some opposition, or, if not my individual life, that larger Christian movement of which I am a faithful part? The pattern of life illustrated so powerfully in Acts 19 is the template of faithful Christian experience and behavior. It is a mirror in which we are to find ourselves and our own experience.

The Lord will decide how powerfully the gospel will move in any time and place, but if we respond as the Ephesians did, word of the Lord will continue to increase and prevail. *That* should be our hope and our expectation! That should definitely be our marching orders!