

Creekside Community Church
 Primal Church: The Acts of the Apostles
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How the Gospel Changes Culture Acts 19:8-41

In his book, *Questioning Evangelism*,¹ Randy Newman recounts an experience he had at a conference. At the conference, a group of religious leaders was trying to answer this question; “*how can we avoid religious conflict?*” More specifically, “*how can we avoid conflict when discussing our religious convictions?*” Over the course of several days, panelists chimed in with their answers. And then, it was Randy’s turn. And he had a different take on the question. He said, “*Honestly, I don’t think we can eliminate conflict...My religious tradition emphasizes that all people...are created in the image of God. So we always should show respect, listen well, and validate each other... But [we say]... ‘You shouldn’t just try this. You have to believe it or your lost.’ That makes it a message that always sparks conflict.*” And then, there was a long pause. Finally, a Bhuddist chaplain spoke up. And he said, “*I think [Randy’s] right. Whenever I put up a poster about some Bhuddist event, no one gets upset. Every time a [Christian] group puts up a poster, it gets torn down I don’t think [you’re] doing anything wrong. I just think the nature of [your] message makes some people hostile.*”

The Christian message elicits a response, doesn’t it? We believe that one needs to trust in Christ to be right with God. And that feels confrontational. And, as we’ll see today, it can create resistance. But this message doesn’t merely confront. It also transforms. When we see Jesus for who he is, it changes the way we see everything else. And as the message changes people, it eventually changes culture.

Everyone wants to see the culture change, don’t they? No one looks at the status quo and says, “*wait! Everyone, stop what you’re doing! Let’s keep things exactly like this.*” No! “*The status quo must go!*” Everyone hopes that history will progress towards some ideal. And Christians are no different. We don’t believe that God merely offers a pleasant, private spiritual experience. He wants to advance his kingdom; to establish his justice and his peace on the earth. Jesus wants to see the culture change. And today we’re talking about Christ and culture. And at the outset, I need to disappoint you; because I’m not going to say everything that could – or even should – be said about this topic. This is a massive and complex issue. In fact, Christians have approached it in *at least* 5 distinct ways.² And we don’t have time to evaluate

¹ Randy Newman, *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People’s Hearts the Way Jesus Did* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004); this dialogue is found on p. 91.

² See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, reprint. 2001).

these models. Instead, I have a far more limited goal. I want to show you how the gospel – the message of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection – has the power to change culture. The gospel is the power of God for salvation; but it’s also God’s power for cultural transformation. And if we want to see culture transformed, we need to appreciate the dynamic power of the Christian message.

In Acts 19, Luke recounts Paul’s ministry in the city of Ephesus. This is Paul’s most fruitful period of ministry. He doesn’t just start a church. He starts a network of churches. And his ministry impacts the social order. This passage shows us how the gospel changes culture. And it offers some lessons for us. If we want to see culture change, we must follow Paul’s example; we do this by *explaining* the message of Jesus, by *experiencing* the power of Jesus, and finally, by *expecting* resistance to Jesus.

A. Explain the Message of Jesus: After visiting some of the churches he founded, Paul travels to Ephesus. We’ll pick up the story in verse 8: *“And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.⁹ But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the multitude, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.¹⁰ And this took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”*

Paul starts his ministry by going to the synagogue; the Jewish religious center. When Paul enters a city, this is his standard operating procedure. He teaches in the synagogue for three months. But then, the Jews get fed up with his message. And they begin speaking out against the gospel. So the missionary team packs up their bags. And they set up shop in the School of Tyrannus. This was a local educational center. During their leisure time, people would visit this school. And they’d listen to lectures on the latest trends in philosophy. Paul rented out space in this hall. And he taught here daily for two years. And from here, the gospel explodes outward. According to Luke, the gospel eventually reaches every part of Asia (v. 10). Now, that doesn’t mean Paul personally spoke to every person in the province. It means that his message spread throughout the region. This map helps us visualize the expansion of the gospel. Here’s the Roman province of Asia (that’s modern-day Turkey). From Ephesus, the gospel spreads outward. People become Christians. New churches are started. And from these churches, the gospel extends even further. These other churches are listed on the map. We learn about them elsewhere in the New Testament. So Paul was instrumental in creating an entire network of churches in this province.

Paul devotes his time to explaining the gospel. And the gospel message makes an exponential impact. But why was Paul so effective? I mean, I’ve shared the gospel. But I’ve never seen these kinds of results?

Well God is clearly at work. *He* is the one using Paul. But what does God use? What

exactly did Paul do? Here are three reasons I think Paul's ministry was so effective. And they're instructive for us.

First, Paul's ministry was local. He spends a total of three years in Ephesus. That's his longest stint anywhere in the book of Acts. And during this time, he has a day job. Paul engages locally. And he does so over an extended period of time.

We live in a global society; we're always being reminded of what's happening everywhere else. But as my friend Brian says, life is local. In Acts 17, Paul says that God establishes the boundaries of our habitation (17:26). That means God has placed you here. This is where life happens. And, as my friend says, if God was sovereign enough to place you here, he's sovereign enough to stir the hearts of your neighbors and draw them to Jesus. We can't reach people we don't know. So are you living locally? Saying "hi" to neighbors, attending the same civic events, serving at the same non-profit, walking to the same places, eating at the same restaurants, hobbying with the same people – these are just a few ways to build rhythms; to consistently engage with people. We engage locally. And it takes time. It did for Paul, and it does for us. Faithful, consistent presence is the first step to effective ministry.

Paul's ministry was local. Second, it was costly. Paul isn't a professional. He wasn't funded by some missions organization back in Jerusalem. He has a day job. In this culture, people woke up at daybreak. They worked until 11:00 am. Then, they rested at midday. And then they returned to work in the late afternoon. So here's Paul's daily routine: he gets up at daybreak. He works as a tentmaker until lunchtime. And then, he lectures for 4-5 hours. In their leisure time, people come and hear Paul teach. So while others are resting, Paul is laboring. Now, I realize this schedule isn't feasible for most of us. But here's the principle: *effective ministry is costly ministry*. If you invest marginally, you'll have a marginal impact. If you want to see God's kingdom advance, you must be prepared to expend yourself.

Right now, God is doing some exciting things through *Celebrate Recovery*. Lots of new people are engaging in the recovery process. Leaders are being multiplied. And the ministry is growing. But no one is getting paid to do any of it! Everyone on the leadership team has a day job. But they're spending hours of their free time pouring into others.

Effective ministry is never convenient. It will never be convenient to spend time with your co-workers, or to invite your neighbors over for dinner, or to build new friendships. As parents, it will never be convenient for us to connect with our kids in the evening. Sometimes, Kshelle asks me to put Addie to bed. And I'm just not up for it. And I want to say, "honey, I realize that Addie is ready for bed. But, the Warriors are ready to play. Sorry. My hands are tied." But listen; I won't remember that game. But Addie will remember the times that dad read with her; that he drew her out, and prayed with her, and spoke blessing over her. It's exhausting, but it's worth it. Listen, I'm paid to live missionally. And it's still inconvenient. There's always a cost. But it's worth paying. And if you're a Christian, I know that deep down, you want to live this way. You want to expend yourself for Christ's kingdom. You want to see

lives transformed, and Jesus exalted. It's what you were created in Christ to do. It's going to cost you. But can you think of a better way to spend your life?

Paul's ministry was local. It was costly. And third, it was persuasive. Twice, Luke says that Paul "*reasoned*" with people from the Scriptures. That word "*reason*" means, "*dialogue*." Paul wasn't combative. He didn't leave angry comments under blog posts. And he wasn't emotionally manipulative. He listened to questions, and objections. And he patiently explained the faith.

Last week, we talked about how to be mighty in the Scriptures. And as my dad said, we don't just study the Bible for our own benefit. We study it for the benefit of others. As I understand the faith better, I become more confident. I become less combative. I'm able to field objections. And I'm able to apply the gospel to people's lives. There's no cookie-cutter way to share Christ. Every situation is different. Every person is different. And as we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures, we become more skilled in engaging people.

Paul shared the gospel. His ministry was local. It was costly. And it was persuasive. And God used it to transform an entire province. And if we wish to see our region impacted, we must imitate Paul's example.

B. Experience the Power of Jesus: But Paul didn't merely explain the message of Jesus. He also experienced the power of Jesus. God verified the truthfulness of Paul's message through signs and wonders. Let's read on.

"And God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul,¹² so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out."

God does extraordinary miracles through Paul. Now, that sounds redundant, doesn't it? Isn't a miracle, by definition "*extra-ordinary*"? Most people don't talk about that "*ordinary miracle*" they experienced the other day. Luke's point is that these miracles were *unusual*, even for Paul. The apostles performed signs and wonders; but not this frequently, or this effectively. Everyone Paul touches is getting healed.

People are even taking Paul's clothes, and using them to heal people and cast out demons. Now, we need to handle this verse with care. Luke isn't suggesting that we *should* do this. You don't need to have a holy man pray over your handkerchief. Ephesus was the magic capital of the Roman world. These people believed in all sorts of powerful spirits. And they used amulets, and incantations to ward off evil spirits, and to secure the gods' favor. And they conceived of miraculous power in material terms. So it appears they view Paul's garments as talismans; as objects that mediate his power.³ And God is merciful to these people, isn't he? They're impressed with Paul. They don't realize that he's merely an instrument in God's hands. And yet, they benefit from his ministry. But *not everyone* benefits. "*But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits*

³ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (ZECNT: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); 795

the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches." ¹⁴ And seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. ¹⁵ And the evil spirit answered and said to them, "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" ¹⁶ And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded."

You know, if you enter a fight clothed, but you leave it naked and wounded, you've lost; plain and simple. There was no split decision. As word of Paul's ministry spreads, people begin to realize that Jesus has power. But they try to co-opt his power for their own purposes. The sons of Sceva were itinerant Jewish exorcists (apparently that was a thing in the first century). These men have blended their Jewish beliefs with magical practices. And they think Jesus' name possesses magical power. So they use it in a kind of magical formula. But these exorcists aren't Christians. They aren't Christ's representatives. So they don't actually possess Christ's authority. So this little magic experiment ends quite badly for them. Now we may find this story humorous. But no one in Ephesus thought it was funny. They had quite a different reaction.

"And this became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. ¹⁸ Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. ¹⁹ And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of all; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. ²⁰ So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing."

When people hear about this story, they're terrified. They realize that Jesus possesses incomprehensible power. He is Lord. And he cannot be tamed, or controlled.

And as a result of this incident, two things happen. First, new people become Christians. They begin magnifying the name of Jesus. And second, Christians start repenting of their sins. They realize that Jesus is the ultimate power. So they stop relying on the power of magic. They bring out their magical books. And they burn them publicly. People thought that a spell's power was bound up with its secrecy.⁴ By destroying the books publicly, these believers wanted to destroy the power of their spells. And many Christians repented in this way. Luke says the total cost of these books was about 50,000 pieces of silver. That amounts to the yearly wage of 137 workers.⁵ Clearly, the gospel is advancing. As Luke says in verse 20, the word of the Lord is growing and prevailing.

God uses miracles to verify the truth of the gospel. We see this throughout the New Testament. And we still see it today. I used to work with Middle Schoolers at a church in Southern California. One year, our pastors went to India. And when they returned, we asked our Senior Pastor, *"hey, how was the trip?"* And he told us how we went to an unreached village. And he healed a blind man. And hundreds of people came to know Jesus. Now, that's

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev ed. (NICNT: Grand Rapids: Eeremans, 1988); 369

⁵ Schnabel, 799.

unusual, isn't it? I mean, we had lots of outreaches to Middle Schoolers, and nothing like that ever happened. When the gospel invades new places, God works supernaturally. And he confirms the message. I long for him to work that way here.

But I'm tempted to manufacture his work. That's what the sons of Sceva try to do, isn't it? They relied on a formula. They wanted to co-opt Jesus' power; to manipulate it. And I'm prone to make the same error; to rely on methods, and strategies, and clichés, and formulas; to trust in the method, rather than in God himself.

When I was a freshman in college, I was asked to speak at a High School. And my talk was on morality. I wanted to show these students that morality isn't subjective; that some things are right, and some are wrong. And these truths transcend time and culture. Before giving the talk, I was on the internet. And I started looking at things I had no business looking at. And then, I left. I went to the High School. I gave the talk. And then, I walked right back into my dorm room, and right back to those images. And, praise God, I felt convicted. And I said to myself, *"Jeff, you just said that morality is absolute. And now, you're doing something that's absolutely wrong. Do you think this is a game? Do you think this is just about saying the right words? Or, going through the right motions? Do you think God will be mocked?"*

We can't manufacture God's work. Yes, we can speak the gospel. But we can't make people believe it. We can't just say the magic formula. We *need* God to transform us, and others. We need him to verify the gospel message. So how do we experience God's power? First, we pray. We plead with God to work in extraordinary ways; to do miracles in peoples' lives so that they see God's power, and believe his message. Second, we repent. There is no revival without repentance; because when the Holy Spirit moves, he moves us into holiness. And when these believers see Christ's power, they repent. They burn the books. And as we come clean – as we confess our sins to family, and friends – we bear witness to God's transformative power.

C. Expecting Resistance to Christ: And as we explain Christ's message, and experience his power, the culture begins to change. But with change comes resistance. God has worked powerfully in Ephesus. And now, Paul is starting to think about his next adventure. He wants to go to Greece; and then, to Jerusalem. And ultimately, he wants to go to Rome. But, he's not quite ready to leave Ephesus. So, he sends a few of his co-workers to Greece. They go ahead of him. But he stays a bit longer in Asia Minor. And this is when things get crazy. Let's read on, beginning in verse 23.

"And about that time there arose no small disturbance concerning the Way. ²⁴ For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen; ²⁵ these he gathered together with the workmen of similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business. 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 considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods

at all. ²⁷ *"And not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship should even be dethroned from her magnificence."*

To understand this passage, we need to understand the historical context. Ephesus was home to the temple of Artemis. And Artemis was kind of a big deal. She was the goddess of hunting and fertility. And she protected the city. In inscriptions, she's referred to as *"Queen of Heaven," "Savior,"* and *"Lord."* Her image was on coins. She had a month named after her. An annual sporting event was held in her honor. She could break the chains of fate, and protect people against harm. And her temple was amazing. It was four to seven times larger than the Greek Parthenon! It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was also the major banking institution.⁶ So this city revolved around the worship of Artemis.

Demetrius is a silversmith. He makes little Artemis souvenirs. People would buy these statues, and pray to Artemis for protection. But now, the gospel is penetrating the culture. People are trusting in Jesus' power. So they aren't trusting in Artemis'. And that's bad for business. So Demetrius gathers his fellow tradesman. And he says, *"do you see what's happening? Paul is robbing us of business. And, he's disrespecting our great goddess!"*

And with this, everyone loses their mind. They people are enraged. And they start shouting, *"Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"* They run into the amphitheater. This was a massive outdoor arena, where assemblies were held, and key decisions were made. They grab two of Paul's co-workers and bring them on the stage. Paul wants to address the crowd. But his friends won't let him. A few city officials even write to Paul, and ask him to stay out of the theater. Paul had befriended these officials, and they didn't want him to be harmed. This gives you a sense of his influence in the city. Meanwhile, confusion reigns in the theater. Most of the people have no idea why they've assembled. The local Jewish community begins to worry that they'll be implicated in this mess. After all, Paul preaches a very Jewish message about the God of Israel. So the Jews send a spokesperson up to address the crowd. But when the crowd sees him, they recognize that he's Jewish. And they're filled with nationalistic pride. So they start shouting, *"Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"* And they keep shouting... for 2 hours!

Finally, the city clerk shows up. He's the most powerful city administrator. He quiets the crowd. And then he addresses them: *"Men of Ephesus, what man is there after all who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is guardian of the temple of the great Artemis, and of the image which fell down from heaven?"* ³⁶ *"Since then these are undeniable facts, you ought to keep calm and to do nothing rash."* ³⁷ *"For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of our goddess."* ³⁸ *"So then, if Demetrius and the craftsmen*

⁶ Information adapted from Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (ZECNT: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); 31-32. Arnold, 31 says that, "The influence of this goddess and the cult attached to her permeated every area of life for those who lived in this city."

who are with him have a complaint against any man, the courts are in session and proconsuls are available; let them bring charges against one another. ³⁹ *"But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful assembly.* ⁴⁰ *"For indeed we are in danger of being accused of a riot in connection with today's affair, since there is no real cause for it; and in this connection we shall be unable to account for this disorderly gathering."* ⁴¹ *And after saying this he dismissed the assembly."*

The clerk begins by reminding the people of Artemis' greatness. Long ago, a meteor had fallen near the city. Some people thought it looked like Artemis. And they assumed she sent it to them. So they placed it in her temple. In saying this, the clerk is taking a swipe at Paul. In effect, he's saying, *"Paul doesn't think Artemis is real. But he doesn't realize that our goddess sent us an image of herself."*

And then he tells the people to settle this matter in the courts. And he warns them not to start a riot. Ephesus is a Roman province. And the city clerk is the liaison between the people and their Roman rulers. If things got out of hand, the Romans would have swooped in. And they may have punished the people by taking away freedoms. So the city clerk is saying, *"let's not upset our rulers, ok? None us want that."* And at this, the crowd disperses.

When the gospel penetrates a culture, we should expect resistance. And here's why; *Jesus dethrones, and destroys idols*. An idol is anything you treat as ultimate. It's that thing you can't live without. It's your functional savior. This culture revolved around Artemis. But now, Jesus is kicking her off the throne. People are starting to view her differently. And the whole economy is impacted. And people resist this change.

Jesus wants to destroy every cultural idol. In traditional cultures, family can be an idol. Nothing is more important than my parents' expectations. I *must* please them. But Jesus says, *"obey me, even if it displeases your parents."* In non-traditional cultures, self can be an idol. We worship self-actualization, and expression. But Jesus loves me more than I love myself. And I belong to Jesus. And that means he has the authority to tell me what to do with my thoughts, and my feelings, and even my body. Jesus destroys the idol of romantic love. You'll never find that special someone who completes you. He already exists. And his name is Jesus. Jesus destroys the idol of money, and power, and on and on. Do you see why this message creates conflict? Jesus is picking a fight with every other god!

And notice, the message creates all of the conflict. Paul doesn't create it. The city clerk says that Paul isn't a blasphemer. In other words, Paul didn't go around speaking against Artemis. He spoke about the greatness of Jesus. But when people realized who Jesus was, Artemis paled in comparison. And that's a great reminder for us. We need to be single-issue evangelists. We need to make Jesus the issue. And we should go out of our way *not* to offend people. We don't need to rail against everything. We need to exalt Jesus; because once you understand who he is, you *have* to think about your other allegiances. Jesus is capable of creating all of the conflict that needs to be created.

I hope you see that the *message* makes the difference. The message is what people believe. The message dethrones idols, and transforms behavior. And it changes the culture. And if we want to see culture change, we must focus on the message. We must explain it. We must ask for God to verify it with supernatural power. And then, we must expect resistance, because Jesus is an idol-destroyer. We preach Jesus as Lord. He confronts us. He challenges our allegiances. And yet, he's unlike any other god. Gods demand sacrifice. The god of work, says, *"sacrifice your family, so that you can be successful."* The god of self says, *"sacrifice your loyalty, and your connection to others. You can't trust anyone but me."* Gods demand sacrifice. But Jesus sacrifices for us. He lives our life. He dies our death. He rises so that we can live forever. Idols keep taking. But Jesus keeps giving. And that makes Jesus the God worth trusting. Let's pray.

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