

Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship

Nominal Religion and the Gospel

Acts 19.8-10, 23ff

7.2.17

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 people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.¹⁰ This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

²³ *About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way.²⁴ For a 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 "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 "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 will even be dethroned from her magnificence."²⁸ When they heard this and were filled with rage, they began crying out, saying, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"²⁹ The city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed with one accord into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia.³⁰ And when Paul wanted to go into the assembly, the disciples would not let him.³¹ Also some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his sent to him and repeatedly urged him not to venture into the theater.³² So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together.³³ Some of the crowd concluded it was Alexander, since the Jews had put him forward; and having motioned with his hand, Alexander was intending to make a defense to the assembly.³⁴ But when they recognized that he was a Jew, a single outcry arose from them all as they shouted for about two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"³⁵ After quieting the crowd, the town clerk said, "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 "So, since 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 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 events, since there is no real cause for it, and in this connection we will be unable to account for this disorderly gathering."⁴¹ After saying this he dismissed the assembly.*

We've been looking at this earliest book of church history, The Acts of the Apostles. And we're seeing the Christian message ("gospel") spreading in the days and decades after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Each week the WORD seems to jump over some new hurdle; the gospel or good news of Jesus Christ is moving outward from Jerusalem...the church ignited ("the incendiary fellowship") is spreading OUTWARD.

Last week we saw the message in the intellectual capital of the Western World, Athens...and TODAY, the good news comes to one of the religious, spiritual centers of the ancient world, the huge metropolis of Ephesus. It was a place full of temples and especially known for the Temple of Artemis.

In the confrontation that takes place, we meet a variety of characters and some odd stuff...we'll refer to the whole chapter today (even the parts we didn't read) and we'll notice that IN this very spiritual and very religious place...some people are VERY religious, some are sort of half-way Christian and others are what C.S. Lewis would have called "MERE Christians" i.e. that's their whole source of security.

And THAT word, "security" is a big theme in this whole passage – the quest to be whole, to be at peace, to be home, to belong, to flourish/thrive and be safe...to be secure.

This is really a chapter-long case study in our universal quest for security – how raw religion seeks security, how nominal (i.e. in name only) how nominal Christians think about security and finally how MERE Christians approach this quest for well-being ...And those are our three points: security and full-blown religion, security and half-baked Christianity and (3rd) security and MERE Christianity.

Ephesus was the third or fourth largest city in the Roman Empire...and it was swimming in religion. The Temple of Artemis (one of the wonders of the world) was there and people came from all over to visit that temple and to buy little statues of Artemis – she was goddess of fertility and goddess of hunting.

And this BIG temple and these little statues are all a way of getting security...that's what raw religion or karma or idolatry promises. If you will DO this then you GET that – if you buy a statue...do homage to the Great Artemis THEN you will be blessed, prosper and thrive, be whole, BE SECURE!

This scene is what we might call "gross idolatry" and that was the besetting sin of the Hebrew Church – the Hebrew Bible (especially the prophets) seems to constantly pinpoint THIS particular sin. The Israelites lived in lands soaked in gross idolatry and they adopted the idolatry of their pagan neighbors.

When Jesus Christ comes, the gross idolatry of the Israelites had pretty much disappeared...but really it had gone UNDERGROUND. And Paul will use another word for this subtle/refined type of idolatry; Paul calls it "epi-thumia" or literally "over-desire" i.e. when a person looks to something and has to have it because IT is seen as the source of security.

"I have to get people's approval (it makes me feel secure)"... "I have to have lots of money" (Proverbs 18 – "A rich man's wealth is his strong city..." wealth is a huge source of security – we

over-desire it). People use looks or youth or status symbols (like cars, purses, clothing, jewelry), marital status, job-titles.

Usually, there's a visible object (a symbol) AND something deeper... The car is the symbol but what he really wants is the admiration of women...or to be envied. Under most idols is a quest for comfort, control, love, power, importance, or security.

Here in Ephesus this comes out in the speech of Demetrius in v. 25. It looks like he's devoted to the goddess Artemis but he tips his hand when he points to the real goal of his religion, (quote) "Men, you know that our prosperity depends on this business."

The idol is the statue he makes and worships but the real goal is prosperity – the word is an equivalent to the Hebrew word, "shalom" meaning well-being or thriving or security... Our idols get us security.

And idolatry...whether it's gross idolatry (where people bow before statues) OR the refined/subtle kind where we take good things and turn them into ultimate things (things we HAVE to have) – the idol always promises to support us but in the end WE always have to support the idol...it has to be carried!

Alcohol or heroin or pornography or the newest Fendi purse promises to make me feel good or important or special or comfortable or powerful... but in the end I have to feed the habit... I have to carry the idol – the idol won't carry me!

You see it here when in the second speech (v. 35) where the town clerk says, "we are guardians of the Temple of Artemis" – see? Artemis doesn't support and protect US – WE have to guard and protect her!

Raw religion and idolatry also tends toward fear and irrationality. You see the fear in the first speech – "there's danger that we'll lose our livelihood! And Artemis will be dethroned! Be afraid...be very afraid!" And notice the racial insecurity in v.33 (anti-Semitism).

And when raw fear and baseless emotion takes over people check the brains... These people chanted for TWO HOURS, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" And here again – it's why idolatry and addictions eventually become immune to reason...and people forget WHY they're doing WHAT they're doing.

And...in religion...there are often certain attractive and true elements... whether it's Buddhism or Islam or any spiritual program, of course there are truths. You see it here in the second speech, "you ought to keep calm and do nothing rash". Luke wants his readers to see, "Even the opponents of Christianity can recognize certain truths..."

Second, and these are some of the sections we skipped in this long Ephesus Chronicle, we meet in the end of CH 18 and early in CH 19 we meet people who are...sort-of Christians...three little case studies.

There's a man named Apollos. He's not one of these raw-religionists or gross idolaters in Ephesus: he's Jewish...and he believes in Jesus Christ but something is a little amiss with Apollos. He's teaching in the synagogues and very able to show from the Hebrew Bible that Jesus of Nazareth really IS the promised Messiah – he's an apologist, a defender of the faith...but somethin' aint right!

A Christian couple, Priscilla and Aquila hear him speaking in a synagogue...and are very impressed but they also KNOW that something is missing! So they pull him aside and help him see the Way of God. Jesus Christ is NOT just a prophet calling us to change and reform our lives...and Apollos is teachable and he goes on his way a new and improved defender of the faith...a man fixed on grace.

Then there's a group of 12 disciples in Ephesus and Paul asks them if they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed in Jesus Christ but they hadn't even HEARD about the Holy Spirit – they TOO saw Jesus as a Messiah who came primarily to tell us a better way to live and obey...a reformer (like John the Baptist).

And Paul tells these, half-baked Christians, “No! Jesus didn't come to give us a better example but to live and die IN OUR PLACE” ...AND THEY GET IT! They're baptized INTO Christ – they become members of the Body of Christ, (the Church) and they're filled with the Holy Spirit – forgiveness and new life from God... Jesus Christ as Savior NOT just example!

And then a third case-study of half-baked Christianity, these Jewish exorcists who hear about Paul doing exorcisms in the Name of Jesus Christ and they decide to sort of imitate Paul. And they say to a man possessed by an evil spirit: “In the name of Jesus Christ whom Paul preaches come out.” And the evil spirit answers, “I know Paul and I know Jesus but who are YOU?!” And the exorcists end up beaten and bleeding and running for their lives and it says, “and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.” (19.17)

Now, the number of nominal Christians in our own time and place may be declining... but in my own experience, I've met a lot of them. In many ways they look a lot like the ones in these chapters. Often they see Jesus Christ as primarily an example to be followed. He's like all the great religious teachers only greater...and when we see His better example we should repent and try harder to follow Him.

For so many nominal Christians...and they may be very serious Catholics or Lutherans or Presbyterians, they hear every sermon as a challenge for them to DO better or try harder...to be like Jesus...to amend their lives, to repent, to love more, give more.

And they may invoke the Name of Jesus like those ancient exorcists...using the Name of Jesus in a way that's really not much different from raw religion – the name of Jesus Christ used a good-luck-charm or a magic spell... In fact, this can be the person in the very worst spiritual condition of all people because they USE the right words...but there's no real power and no real relationship. The person is using Jesus Christ to get something that he/she needs to be happy or healthy or prosperous or secure.

And to tell a person like this that he or she is really NOT a Christian will either be perceived as a terrible insult OR will drive the person to “double-down” and try harder to imitate Jesus...as if THIS is the main thing, Jesus our great Example.

And this brings us to our last point, Paul is teaching a completely different way. And those who GOT it, living in this huge city filled with “spiritual forces of wickedness” (Eph 6.12) – Paul withdraws with these mere Christians “reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God...reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.” (8-10)

This is NOT about a Messiah who is the greatest example – just like John the Baptist only more perfect, someone to imitate. No, this is the Messiah who doesn't tell us how to get to Heaven – HE IS HEAVEN come down to us.

He is the one who lives and dies IN OUR PLACE – He earns us a perfect record (obeys FOR us!) and He is NOT the superior idol or the secret password to help us get what we really want or need – HE IS WHAT WE WANT AND NEED... not a means to an end – He IS the goal and the highest Good. He gives Himself!

Paul took the disciples away to see how Jesus Christ is not an example but a substitute. He doesn't tell us what we have to do to qualify for Heaven – He Himself qualifies us! He takes our guilty verdict and HE GIVES US HIS STATUS – we become delightful sons and daughters in the sight of God. We become perfectly secure... in Christ alone!

AND when we get THAT, when we see Him as our security...then we become free to be what God created us to be: sons and daughters who obey NOT to earn God's love and forgiveness but who obey because it's our destiny... I've been declared righteous and by the power of the Spirit I am becoming righteous...becoming in practice what I am declared to be.

This is a new platform for life – Paul refers to it as the Kingdom of God and the Way of God...I withdraw into the school of Tyrannus and I reason about it with you...We reason together...and God pushes this New Way deeper into my heart and motives. It begins to influence my marriage, my singleness, my friendships, my job, my money...

And most of all...my security – I begin to see a future with God a feast that never ends... In some sense I'm already there, seated with Christ in the heavens (Eph 2.4-7) That's what we celebrate

now – a tiny foretaste of a feast, guaranteed and secure, purchased NOT by my efforts but by Him who lived and died and rose on behalf of all who merely believe.

The Communion

This is from St Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, CH 11: *For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; ²⁴ and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." ²⁵ In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. ²⁷ Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. ²⁸ But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. ³⁰ For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. ³³ So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. ³⁴ If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment. The remaining matters I will arrange when I come.*

According to this passage to take the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner, the worshiper has to rightly discern the body (29). We don't have to be good people (or NONE of us would be worthy).

To discern the body means to recognize WHAT the church IS, what IS the Body of Christ, the Church? We recognize that we are the people who do not rely on our good looks, our bank accounts, our social position, our good morals, our political party, our track-record to be right with God. We rely on what Jesus Christ has done for us.

That means that I have nothing to lord over you. My whiteness doesn't make me better than you, my education, my obedience to God's commands... none of these things makes me better than you. We are ALL on the same ground – all sinners, only acceptable to God because of what Jesus had accomplished. THIS is the society that believes that AND THAT MAKES THE CHURCH AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE WORLD... it's a City within the city.

Out there...all those categories determine our worth... in here worth is not achieved – it's received. If you're not a member of the church (some church that teaches this new and living way...this one or another one you normally attend), you are NOT discerning the body...you're not getting it – so don't take the bread and wine... AND if you ARE a member, take this opportunity to thank God for the New Basis for security/significance and repent for sometimes acting like you're better than others because of your income or race or gender or whatever.

We feast here because Jesus Christ has picked up the tab... and HE HIMSELF is the Food we need.

Let's pray.