

Ideas have Consequences
Acts 19:21 – 40
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
January 29, 2017

A brief review of Acts 19 so far

In the first ten verses of chapter 19 we read of Priscilla and Aquila, and later, St. Paul, instructing people who were sincere in wishing to follow Christ, but who were, up until that point, incomplete in their understanding of Christ. The next verses described those who had been caught in the dark side of the spiritual world. The message of Christ freed them and, in response, they confessed their use of the dark arts and burned their books that taught the secrets of magic, spells and sorcery.

Now we turn to the concluding verses of chapter 19 and the focus shifts to the impact of the message of Christ upon the pagan world. It describes how the message of Christ challenges the ever-popular reality of idolatry.

Before we get to the specific confrontation in Ephesus, St. Luke tells us of the Apostle Paul's travel plans for this third missionary journey.

Travel Plans:

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."

Planning is a good thing. The Bible encourages planning. Paul's plans are expansive, visionary. He is in Ephesus. He plans to travel through the region, on his way back to Jerusalem. But his plans do not end there. He feels called to Rome and, we learn in another New Testament passage, he intends from Rome to travel to Spain, establishing churches on the Iberian Peninsula.

As men and women, we make our own history. However, we do not make our history entirely as we choose. Paul's plans are changed. What we find in these verses is the interaction of Paul's plans with the politics, economics, pagan religion and civic realities of his day. We live as Christians in the world. We are not isolated from the world about us. The world pushes back.

Why?

First, because the message of Christ has economic consequences.

The message of Christ has economic consequences

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.

One of the things that concerned me about the Obama administration was its tendency to speak about “freedom of worship” but not about “freedom of religion.” “Freedom of worship” limits and confines freedom of religion to what happens within these walls – the walls of our worship space, the meeting place of Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church. What we do on Sunday mornings is important, essential: it is the first step in our process of discipleship. But, the Christian faith we believe and confess is much more than the worship we offer to the triune God on Sunday mornings. Our Christian faith is lived out in the world. It has impact upon our lives, Monday through Saturday.

Demetrius is a silversmith and he sees the economic impact of the spread of the Christian faith in Ephesus. As we read last week,

¹⁸ Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. ¹⁹ And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver.

Demetrius had no doubt heard of the burning of the magic books. He could see the implication. Ideas have consequences. This new faith would cause an erosion of their business as silversmiths. “Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth.” Sometimes these ancient trade guilds are likened to modern trade unions; but that is not quite right. Jim Boice suggests that they were more like the Philadelphia Mummers: organizations that promoted social bonding, year-round.

In Ephesus was the great temple to the goddess Artemis. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. This temple was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens. It consisted of one hundred and twenty-seven pillars, each sixty feet high. It was three hundred and fifty feet long and a hundred and fifty feet wide. And, it was the center of what had grown into a multisite worship and religious network. There were at least thirty-three smaller temples dedicated to Artemis scattered throughout the Mediterranean world. People would travel to these sites to worship, to offer sacrifices. Traveling on such pilgrimages, the worshippers would buy cult objects, religious souvenirs – the things Demetrius and his fellow silversmiths produced. A large city such as Ephesus would see tens of thousands of pilgrims traveling annually to visit its magnificent temple to Artemis. And, the Temple to Artemis also played the role of a treasury and of a bank. It was big business in the ancient world. Demetrius understood these things: “Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth.”

The message of Christ had economic impact. Secondly, the message of Christ also had spiritual consequences.

The message of Christ has spiritual consequences

This Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods...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.”

Demetrius worries about the consequence in the spiritual competition between the goddess Artemis and Christ. He first spoke of money. But he moves on to speak about civic pride. He worries that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence. He understands that Paul's message undermines the worship of Artemis (verse 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. They were threatened by Paul's message. The spiritual message of Jesus Christ would impact them financially. It undermined the vitality of the spiritual network of the worship of Artemis. The anti-idolatry message preached by Paul might have a practical consequence in the reality of the world as they understood it. Demetrius understood the threat. He knew that ideas have consequences and that the consequence of Paul's ideas would be bad for business.

Not surprisingly, that is exactly what happened. Where Christianity advanced, idolatry declined. Early in the next century the Roman governor of a nearby province complained that the temples to the gods were being forsaken due to conversions to Christianity. Indeed, eventually, all of the ancient pagan religious sites fell into disuse and were abandoned. Pagan gods could not stand before the message of the authority of Jesus Christ. However, I am getting ahead of the story.

The message of Christ had economic consequence. The message of Christ had spiritual consequence. It is not surprising therefore that the message of Christ provokes opposition.

The message of Christ provokes opposition

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.

People who serve other gods take offense at the message of Jesus Christ. This is not surprising. We declare of Jesus Christ that he is "The King of kings, The Lord of lords." Those who serve other kings, other lords, will naturally find this declaration offensive. Listening to Demetrius, the crowds in Ephesus became enraged. They cried out: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" That, by the way, was a typical means of expressing devotion to a pagan god. The consequence was a great deal of sound and fury, and confusion.

And, the fury of the city had immediate, adverse consequences for two of Paul's friends, Gaius and Aristarchus. Why them? St. Luke does not tell us explicitly, but he does not need to do so. Riotous crowds are unmanageable. Chances are that these two men were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were the spontaneous objects of the crowd's wrath.

The message of Christ is a battle of ideas. And ideas have consequences. We proclaim Christ to a world with other loyalties. When the world around us perceives the implicit judgment upon them by the authority of Jesus Christ, it grows angry. There are many arenas of conflict today between the Christian faith and the world around us. The conflict is inevitable. Much of the conflict between the church and the world around us revolves around human sexuality. This is nothing new. Artemis was a fertility goddess; her statues portrayed her as multi-breasted. The devotion of the pagan world to the goddess Artemis had a strong sexual component to it. Part of the anger expressed that day flowed from the church's challenge to the freewheeling sexuality of the Artemis cult. As a community of faith, we at Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church affirm the traditional doctrines and moral teachings of the church regarding human sexuality. It is not just that we believe these teachings to be true. Also, we believe that these doctrinal and moral standards point us to the only way that will produce real and lasting human community, satisfaction and growth. As Albert Mohler Jr. has written, "We are not merely opposed to same-sex marriage because we believe it to be contrary to Scripture; we believe that anything opposed to Scripture cannot lead to human flourishing." The way of Christ opposes idolatry and spiritual falsehood. For this reason, the message of Christ will always provoke conflict.

The message of Christ has economic consequence. The message of Christ has spiritual consequences. The message of Christ provokes opposition. Next, following Christ requires courage and wisdom.

Following Christ requires courage *and* wisdom

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.

Riotous crowds are inherently weak. People will do in a crowd what they would never dream of doing individually. This is why they are dangerous. Hapless individuals, like Gaius and Aristarchus, may get caught up by a riotous crowd. At the Woman's March in Washington DC two weekends ago, the Pro-Life women who were present were assaulted and spit upon by others. Apparently, for those who did the assaulting, the right to demonstrate and speak your mind only extends to those who are pro-abortion. But here is the key takeaway: this is the inherent nature of riotous crowds. Riotous demonstration encourages lawlessness. People do in a crowd what they would never dream of doing individually.

Paul had a wide circle of acquaintance. The Asiarchs were the administrators of the city, the magistrates. The theater where the crowd had gathered was large. You can visit it today. It could hold up to twenty-five thousand people. Facing the crowd in Ephesus that day, the Apostle Paul was very brave. Brave, but not very prudent. Being brave is not always wise. Paul wished to go before the crowd, to speak with them, to attempt to reason with them. But you cannot reason with a crowd. Paul's friends intervene. His friends helped him do what was wise and right: to sit tight. Paul relents and stays at the sidelines.

The message of Christ has economic consequence. The message of Christ has spiritual consequences. The message of Christ provokes opposition. Following Christ requires courage and wisdom. And, following Christ requires a sense of humor.

Always keep your sense of humor

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.

My friend Rusty had an opportunity to stand in a receiving line for Ronald Reagan during his first successful campaign for the presidency. Rusty spoke to Reagan as he shook his hand and Reagan was clearly pleased with the words Rusty spoke to him. After Reagan's plane took off, the others in the receiving line asked, "What did you say to him?" Rusty had told Reagan that, after he became president, to be sure to keep his sense of humor, for that was one of his strengths. It sure was. Being wheeled into the operating room after being shot, Reagan looked at the doctors and nurses present and said, "I sure hope you are all Republicans!" Reagan's sense of humor was very endearing.

I mention humor because, being modern Americans who speak English, we may not see the humor in this verse. However, an ancient Greek, reading this verse by St. Luke, would break out laughing. The idea of a crowd of people calling out this or that, in a brouhaha and uproar, and not knowing *why* they were there, would be very humorous to an ancient Greek. The idea of being part of the gathering, expressing fury and indignation, but not knowing why they were demonstrating would seem silly to an ancient Greek.

This, of course, is another reason why crowds and demonstrations are usually of little value. They lack purpose. They lack focus. This too was illustrated this past week when a liberal environmental group hung a sign from a crane that read "Resist," somewhere in the vicinity of the White House. Okay. Resist what? Resist why? Clearly, these folk are not happy with the result of the last election, but their unhappiness lacks positive focus or purpose. I have a friend from my days in the university and we are connected on Facebook. She posted a picture of herself, wearing a red knitted beanie, making obscene gestures, using language in the post that I could never speak from this pulpit, announcing that she was on her way to the Woman's March in Washington DC. I saw the picture, read the post, and I thought to myself, "You really need a better religion." It has become clear, over the past year, that my friend's only confession of faith is expressed in her progressive liberal agenda. She was traveling to Washington as a pilgrim. Gathered in Washington, with the other progressive faithful, she undoubtedly shouted repeatedly the modern equivalent to "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" For too many in our world today, their politics is their religion.

The right response is to keep our sense of humor about such matters. Whether one is happy about the last election or unhappy, God is still on his throne. The world is

unfolding according to his sovereign plan and purpose. The message of Christ brings hope, spiritual change, forgiveness and renewed life.

The message of Christ has economic consequence. The message of Christ has spiritual consequences. The message of Christ provokes opposition. Following Christ requires courage, wisdom and a sense of humor. Lastly, give thanks for capable civic leaders, while remembering that only Christ can save.

Give thanks for capable civic leaders, while remembering that only Christ can save

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...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.

Whoever this unnamed clerk was, he deserves high praise. He successfully diffused the situation. First, he met the people on common ground they all could agree upon. “Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis?” He recognized the validity of their concerns. “If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone.” And then, he reminds them of the rules and he points them to their system of governing and resolving disputes: “the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly.” He is reminding the people that there are legitimate ways to address their concerns. There are avenues available via the civic leaders, the courts and the legislature. And, he warns them appropriately and sternly. “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.” He did what a governing official should do. He kept order. He was professional. One man, Demetrius, caused much mischief that day. And, one man, this unnamed official, quiets things down.

This is one reason why, as Christians, we pray for our governing leaders, whoever they may be. The job of the civil authorities is to maintain peace and order. Through the police powers of the state the civil authorities also restrain evil, protect citizens and bring justice. Ours is a fallen world. No government does these things perfectly. But these are things that are government’s purpose in how God has established creation.

It is important to keep the spheres of life in their proper and distinctive places. The job of government is to maintain order, not to offer salvation. We elect a president, not a savior. Government plays a role in life, but a limited role. We place our faith in Jesus Christ, alone, for only he can save.

Close

I bring this message to a close expressing a solemn concern. As American Christians, we have been very privileged to live in a land that has protected the public expression of religion. The Atkinson's know what it is like to live in a nation that does not offer religious freedom to Christians: we lived for four years in a Muslim nation. My concern is that the ascendancy of secularism in America today is already encroaching upon our religious freedom and that that encroachment is only to increase in coming years.

The reason for this is because secularism is a belief system. It is in competition with the Christian faith for the hearts and minds of people today. The Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, has made some very helpful observations about religion and secularism. Taylor notes that in the ancient world, it was *impossible not to believe*. There was simply no alternative, first to paganism and then, after the rise of Christianity, to theism. Whether Artemis or the God of the Bible, everyone believed. Then, comes the Enlightenment and modernity, it became *possible not to believe*. The secular alternative to Christianity became an option. To illustrate this, I note that the word *atheist* was not even coined until 1552. [As an ironical aside, it was coined by William Coverdale, translating the Bible into English!] The point is that until the sixteenth century, there was not even a word for unbelief. Taylor next observes that the stage in which we live today is, that it is now *impossible to believe*. For the intellectual elites and those who form our world culturally, theism is no longer an optional world view. Let me be clear: secularization is not about rejecting all religion in general. Rather, secularization is about unbelief in a personal God. Unbelief in a personal God who exists and exerts authority upon us and our world.

What this means practically for us as modern Christians is that we are the intellectual outlaws of the modern secular world. Our understanding of God and the created order leaves us in perpetual conflict with the world around us.

I am going to end this sermon as I end nearly every sermon I preach from this pulpit. I invite you to turn to Jesus Christ in faith and belief. He is a personal God. He a real God. It was through Christ that the world we know was created. He is the Lord and Savior of mankind. I invite you to turn to him in faith and belief.

But I also say as we close that in making this invitation, I am inviting you to enter a spiritual world, a faith, that is in significant and on-going conflict with the world in which we live.

Say "Amen!" Somebody!

Acts 19:21 – 40

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.