

MOTIVES

Acts 19:11-20

Paul's third missionary journey was a three-year period of travel and ministry that took place between AD 54 and 58. It included overland travel from Antioch to Phrygia and Galatia, then to Ephesus, where he preached and taught for more than three years. He then sailed to Macedonia, walked to Greece, and stopped in Corinth for three months, where he wrote the letter to the church in Rome. Paul then returned to Macedonia, stopped in Philippi, and sailed to Troas. He then sailed to Caesarea and arrived in Jerusalem. Ephesus was the main focus of Paul's third missionary journey, where he spent more time than any other city during all his missionary trips.

As you know, the account we have in the Book of Acts was written by Luke to provide information to a man named "Theophilus Ben Ananus." He was a priest of the Temple, and served as High Priest from AD 37-41. He was a son of Annas and brother-in-law of the High Priest Caiaphas. Some commentaries state that the reason he asked Luke to document the events regarding the life of Jesus and what happened in the early church was because his daughter had become a believer.

As we have seen in the progression of the events, there were many different situations of people who had a variety of levels of understanding and knowledge of what had transpired over the past half century. Paul had encountered those who were ignorantly superstitious and he had been challenged those who were learned philosophers. Luke recorded that some of those who were interested in what God was doing had only heard the message that John the Baptist preached regarding repentance and were not aware that the promised Messiah nor the Holy Spirit had come. The situation was diverse with many different beliefs and Luke gave examples of this diversity in his record that we see in the book of Acts.

One such diverse group that Paul encountered was a dozen disciples of John the Baptist who were living near Ephesus. When Paul first met these disciples, he apparently sensed that something was not quite right. So, he asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit upon believing. As it developed, Paul wanted to know their belief testimony. He learned that these believed John's prophetic word regarding the coming of the Messiah and the need to turn back to God (repent) in preparation for His coming. They seemed to be unaware that the Messiah had come and was certainly unaware that the Holy Spirit had come to indwell and empower those were trusting in Christ's death on the cross as God's means of salvation. When Paul explained to them what had happened since they had believed John's message, they believed the rest of the account of what God had done and their testimony changed in that they believed the full gospel account.

After this encounter, Paul then frequented the synagogue in Ephesus for a period of three months and taught about the Kingdom of God. It took about that long for the unbelieving Jews to become so obstinate in their opposition that Paul and the believers found another place to meet and continue to learn. God blessed these believers with affirming miracles.

God's Power – 19:11-12

¹¹ And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, ¹² so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. Acts 19:11–12 (ESV)

There were three distinct periods of time recorded in the Scriptures when miracles were quite evident. The first would be during the time of Moses leading up to and following the

exodus from Egypt. The second was during the ministry times of Elijah and Elisha during the waning years of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The third period was, of course, the time of the earthly ministry of Jesus and the forty years that marked the initiation and growth of the church into the known world (Col 1:23). Each of these was less than a century in duration and these were times of significant transitions of what God was doing in the Kingdom of God.

Some have noted some commonality in these miracles: The miracles met human needs in a caring manner, they taught a spiritual truth, and they validated that what was happening had a divine origin. Another similarity in the miracles was that they happened in areas where the people had rejected the authority of God. In all three times, there were attempts to discredit what God was doing by demonstrations of counterfeit miracles. In each case the attempt to counterfeit what God was doing was exposed as being inadequate and lacking power.

On at least two occasions following the resurrection of Christ, obvious healing and deliverance miracles happened in such a way that there could be no doubt that God was causing the miracles to happen. The first occurrence was associated with Simon Peter that Luke recorded in Acts Chapter five where people were healed when the shadow of Peter contacted them. The second happened about twenty years later and Luke recorded that regarding Paul's ministry in Ephesus.

Occult practices were common in the Ephesus area and pagan religion influences were very strong. Warren Wiersbe commented that Paul was demonstrating God's power right in Satan's territory. The combination of preaching the truth of God's salvation along with the confirmation of the message by the miracles was effective as we see from a statement in verse ten "that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord." You will remember that this was the area that God had made off-limits to Paul and Silas during the early days of the Second Missionary trip.

As had happened during the miracle era during the time of Moses as well as during the time of Elijah and Elisha, there were some who attempted to mimic the miracles that God was doing through Paul.

False Motives – 19:13-16

¹³ Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." ¹⁴ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. ¹⁵ But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?"

¹⁶ And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. Acts 19:13-16 (ESV)

In Matthew 24, Jesus warned His disciples of fake spiritual activity in the time leading up to the judgment that would come upon Jerusalem. He said things such as "Many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. Many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. There shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders." This group of seven brothers who were traveling around in the province of Asia promising deliverance from evil spirits was an example of those who were taking advantage of the increased spiritual sensitivity of people who had heard of the miracles that God was doing through Paul's ministry in Ephesus. Some commentators suggested that they offered their services for a fee.

Apparently, the idea was that if you just know the right incantation – the right combination of words – that those who were possessed or oppressed by evil spirits would be delivered from those demons. Usually, the incantation included a reference to an authority or power that the evil spirit would recognize; hence, there would be an invocation of the "name of

Jesus.” When Paul and Silas were in Philippi and they encountered a girl with a spirit of divination, he said the following to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!” At that moment the spirit left her. Paul’s use of “the name of Jesus Christ” was not for the purpose of informing the evil spirit of the basis of Paul’s authority. That evil spirit that possessed the girl already knew that Paul and Silas were representatives of the Christ and were declaring God’s way of salvation. The spirit spoke through the girl and stated “These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation.” The purpose of Paul stating the “name of Jesus Christ” was for the benefit of those who witnessed the power of God being demonstrating through the words Paul spoke. If Paul had not made that reference, then people could have thought that the power came from Paul himself.

In the case of the seven sons of Sceva, they invoked the name of Jesus; however, they were not operating from a “commission” given to them by Christ, but they were operating on nothing more than presumption. Those who have faith in Christ’s sacrificial death for justification and the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives for sanctification have been given the authority to do the “works of Christ” as they live out their lives in the character of Jesus Who is the Way to God. Jesus had told His disciples that “the works that I do, you shall do, and greater works because I go to the Father.”

The evil spirit that was in the man whom these would-be “exorcists” confronted could recognize the difference in true faith and pretended faith. Pretended faith does not involve a fundamental change in character but is simply the invocation of an incantation that was given to the person as a formula for salvation. How many times have we heard that the answer to the question of “How can I be saved?” is “Simply repeat this prayer.”?

A faulty faith does not produce any fundamental lasting changes in a person and does not provide any ability to resist the forces of evil that are present in the world that has allow itself to be possessed by powers and principalities that are opposed to God and His Kingdom. Consequently, we may find ourselves to be overpowered by conduct all around us that is disgusting and destructive to what we know to be right and holy. As a result, we as a nation find ourselves exposed and wounded rather than being clothed in righteousness and functioning as a source of healing to a lost and dying world that needs salvation that Jesus died to make available.

God’s Authority – 19:17-20

¹⁷ And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. 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. ²⁰ So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. Acts 19:17–20 (ESV)

When the power of God is manifested or when people are frightened by the display of spiritual evil, then an awareness of the reality of the spiritual world can have a dramatic impact on people.

What can we learn from what happened among the people in the area of Ephesus when they acknowledged the reality of the spiritual realm and they realized that there were consequences associated with participating in ungodly spiritual activity? There was a holy, awesome awareness (otherwise known as fear) that gripped the believers in that area. This produced an additional (more in-depth level) of repentance that caused them to turn from activities that were “culturally” acceptable but were offensive to God.

This repentance was real and it could be argued that the validation or sincerity of their repentance was that it produced sacrifice as demonstrated by destroying whatever possessions

they had that were associated with “magic and sorcery.” They completely abandoned previous practices that had any connections with paganism. That would be like have hundreds of dollars worth of decorations associated with pagan festivals and then burning them in a bonfire.

In our so-called sophisticated world of the 21st century, we are surprised by the number of educated people who rely on “spiritual advisers” or palm readers and fortune tellers. Many check their horoscopes daily and even high government officials have consulted with mediums. Devil worship is coming more and more into the open and people play with witchcraft in parlor games and no one seems to be concerned.

What is even more surprising is that in some churches we see little or no awareness of spiritual realities. We have substituted Churchianity for Christianity. When we substitute traditions of men for God’s ways, when we merely go through the motions of a “worship service,” when we operate in our own strength, when our actions and even our words deny the power of God, then Churchianity has the upper hand.

Sometimes we in the church try to keep a low profile and blend in with the culture. We like to avoid controversy which is not always possible when we are driven by that which best advances the Kingdom of God. What we see in most churches today is a long way from the picture we see in verse 20 that “the word of the Lord prevailed.” The word of God prevails in our lives when we agree and act on His word. If we agree and act on the advice of the world, then all we have is a “cop-out” rather than a “moving out” of the church. Whatever the situation we are in, we have a choice of how we will respond. The choice can usually be simplified to “the way of the world” or “the way of Jesus.”