

Acts 19:8-22: “Can Jesus Christ Stand The Test?”

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In Acts 18:21, Paul promised some Jews that he would return to Ephesus provided it was God’s will. Chapter 19 provides a very brief summary of his return and subsequent work in Ephesus. Ephesus was such a pagan city that one would wonder if the message of Jesus was relevant and if Jesus Christ could prevail. Can Jesus Christ stand the test in our world today? Let’s talk about that.

Ephesus rests in the heart of the province of Asia. Unlike Athens Ephesus was not open to new philosophies and religions. Ephesus and the province of Asia was hard on Paul. Although Luke is quiet on the matter for the most part, Paul is not. He relates the weight of trial suffered when he came to the province of Asia on his third missionary journey. While in Ephesus he detailed his situation to the dear Christians in Corinth. He wrote,

“We do not want you to be uniformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will continue to deliver us. On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us.”

Pressure, despair, deadly peril. Paul gives us a hint of “deadly peril” in 1 Cor. 15:32 where he describes an incident of “fighting wild beasts in Ephesus.” What? Ephesus was **full of passionate sinners** who did not wish to embrace this *new religion* especially a religion that damaged their economy. But, indeed, we learn in the latter part of Acts 19 that indeed, the powerful message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ was responsible for crippling the lucrative “idol” factories of Ephesus because so many people were being converted! An uprising ensued that was no small disturbance. It was so dangerous that Paul was not allowed to address the crowd. Isn’t it amazing: The Gospel radically altered the behavior of a large city in less than two years! Can it happen here in Columbus? Yes! But I believe we need to rethink “how” we grow our church.

I. 19:8-12 Rethinking Church Growth: Exaltation Through Preaching

Paul arrived in Ephesus with confidence that the Corinthian church was in good hands. Apollos was watering the church plant in Corinth and Paul had come to “plant” in Ephesus! As we saw last week, he first ministered to, or *served* those who were professing belief in Jesus. Those first converts were in process of becoming useful disciples of Christ.

In our text for today I get the distinct impression that these twelve “spirit-filled” disciples were actively engaged in Paul’s teaching and preaching ministry. As Paul spoke boldly in the synagogue for three months (19:8) his disciples were with him!

So, we see the church at this time was involved in the teaching and preaching ministry of Paul. Their involvement is evident because they were with Paul regularly. Granted, without a place to assemble the synagogue was a natural meeting place for Paul, but it did not provide a “sanctuary” like we have today. Paul and his disciples were surrounded by unbelievers who were, at least for a season willing to listen.

The Church was mobile, too. We learn that after three months they were wearing out their welcome. The message was being refused; the people were obstinate; they were maligning the Christ, and the messenger of the Gospel. So, Paul left them! Evidently, there comes a time when the Lord will strive no more with people with hardened hearts. I cannot imagine a more tragic vacancy than when the Gospel light is turned off. But that is what happened.

So Paul took his disciples (the mobility of the church) and rented a lecture hall. Our text simply and plainly states that Paul taught for two years. Now, some manuscripts include a note that Paul taught in this rented room six days a week from 11am-4pm! Instead of the traditional rest in the heat of the day, Paul left his job as a tent maker and made proclamation through preaching and teaching for the sake of exalting Christ!

Evidently, there was significant activity. 19:11-12 relates to us that miracles were worked. The Word was accompanied by great and powerful miracles. Paul’s handkerchiefs (sweat rags) and work aprons were transported to various sick people, so that through faith in Jesus people were healed and delivered from demons!

I want us to notice that the church grew because the gospel was faithfully planted! There is much emphasis on “growing through worship arts” and “growing through vibrant youth ministries” and “growing through community”. But, I’m hear to tell you that the church, the True Church of Jesus Christ grows when the Gospel is faithfully planted through Spirit-filled preaching and teaching. I believe this is true for “church plants” as well as established churches. So, what can we learn?

Paul’s strategic church growth plan was simple: Preach and teach the Gospel to people who did not believe and **expound and explain** the Gospel those who did. This simple plan was not original to Paul. It was the plan of the Lord Jesus. Can you hear Jesus unveil his plan to his disciples in Matthew 28: “Go into all the world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all things I have commanded you.”

So the platform is simple and it served Paul and the other apostles well. If I can explain: 1) The making of disciples necessarily involves proclamation--**evangelism**; 2) The making of disciples necessarily involves a call to respond to the message--**repentance**

and confession through baptism; and 3) Making disciples necessarily involves teaching the Truth of God in Christ-- **expounding and explaining** the Scriptures.

It is my belief that if we can prioritize a simple three tiered model set forth in Matthew 28 and exemplified in Acts 19 that we will be in position to see the Lord Jesus add to His Church, and our fellowship as He sees fit. To review, the simple plan consists of three tiers: 1) The Exaltation of Christ, or proclamation; 2) Call to Exaltation, or Call to Repentance; and 3) Instruction for Exaltation, or Biblical Teaching and Training.

II. 19:13-20 Rethinking Repentance: Repentance Proved The Power of The Word

This passage of Scripture challenged my thinking on church growth. But it also challenged my thinking on repentance.

We don't really hear much about repentance anymore. We don't consistently hear the kind of teaching that is dripping with the glory of God in Christ. These people in Ephesus were not being introduced to a new and rigorous religion of rules and rituals in order to gain the favor of a god. It was Christ who was preached and "placarded" or "portrayed" before them. Christ was set in front of them as the *One* who Himself appeased and propitiated God on our behalf!

Through preaching Christ and through the demonstration of power people repented. As people believed they proved their belief through repentance. We see this clearly in the event mentioned in 19:17-19. They not only heard the word, but they were seized with fear when the power of the Name of Jesus was made evident to Jew and Gentile alike.

Now a certain group of men were "playing" with the name of Jesus. These Jewish men, "the seven sons of Sceva", had routinely exorcised demons by use of Hebraic and pagan incantations. But they did something that is kind of common now days. They flippantly used the name of Jesus. For whatever reason, God at this time, chose to defend the honor of the Name of Jesus. He "let loose of the leash" and allowed this demoniac to beat those boys to a pulp. The result was that throughout all of Ephesus and the regions beyond the Name of Jesus was "feared and held in high honor".

They proved their "fear" by repenting. They *literally* repented. Their repentance was both *verbal* (an overflow of the heart) and *practical* (the removal of very valuable scrolls associated with their sorcery.)

When the dust settled and some analysis was made, it became evident that "In this way the Word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power." In what way? Through evidence of the power of God to preserve Paul in his trials before and during his Ephesian stay; through the faithful perseverance of twelve converts; through the endurance of preaching and teaching for two years in the lecture hall; and through genuine repentance as people feared and honored the Name of Jesus.

So, was “fearing the Name of Jesus Christ” only for people 2,000 years ago; 500 years ago; or 50 years ago? I fear our hearts have become gospel hardened to the point that the Name of Jesus evokes little thought of repentance! We must **consider** and **obey** the biblical call to repentance. To be a people hungry for knowing, loving and obeying Jesus. To live a genuine **confession** saturated in repentance. And become militant in our repentance by **literally** getting rid of things that provoke us to sin, and instead filling our lives with things that promote holy and pure living for Jesus’ sake!!!

God is holy and is concerned for the holiness of His Church. How can we know the heart of our great God as it relates to expanding His glory in the world if He has to constantly concern Himself with our censure? I want us to know His heart for His glory in the world and be militant against those things that quench the Spirit! Somehow Paul had a good grasp of God’s heart for the world.

III. 19:21-22 Rethinking Plans and Projects: Paul makes plans for Rome.

Apparently after there became some stability in the church at Ephesus Paul was ready to expand the mission for the exaltation of God in the world. I believe at this time he was already seeing that the first work of evangelism in this part of the world was coming to a close. Churches were taking root and now doing the work of the ministry. Therefore, the faithfulness on the part of the local churches provided that those gifted with church planting could go and plant! Paul, saw way beyond the Province of Asia. He saw Rome! And beyond Rome he saw the utter most parts of the known world--Spain!

Paul planned and looked forward to future ministry. His calling was to plant. But if you read the other epistles you will see that the local churches, such as the churches in Macedonia and the province of Asia, were educated for in-reach and outreach. They took the responsibility of in-reaching to the family of God seriously. They provided offerings for their esteemed but suffering brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. And they also provided for Paul’s missionary journeys beyond their borders!

I think this facet of the church is beautiful and should be maintained. Paul’s planning was very inclusive of both the local church as well as the broad scope mission that he was called too.

It is my hope that we will become a well rounded church keeping biblical priorities our priorities. Here are some key priorities I would like to focus on as a church:

- 1) To faithfully proclaim the Gospel evangelistically to people in our community who are not believers and proclaim the Gospel to the church by faithfully expounding and explaining the Gospel for our edification.**
- 2) To encourage repentance from sinful attitudes and actions through not only confessing our sins but also practically turning them away from us.**
- 3) That any projects we undertake at this point in our church history would fit in the categories of either “in-reach” to build up established churches including our own, or “out-reach” to the world with a heavy emphasis on evangelism.**

So, can Jesus stand the test? Will He honor His Name through faithful, Spirit-filled preaching, through militant repentance, and purposeful ministry expansion into the world with the big focus being on the exaltation of God in the church and in the world through faith in Jesus Christ?

Let us endeavor to apply this simple biblical model for one year and see what God is pleased to do!

Grace to you!