

Gods and money

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Date: 30 July 2017

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] of the Ephesians. If you're wondering what the temple looked like, there's a picture of it up on the screen. I don't know exactly how accurate it is, but there are various temples and reconstructions of it and pictures have been made and they all look pretty much like that.

I imagine that's a fairly accurate picture of the temple of Artemis in Ephesus. As you can see, it's a fairly impressive looking place.

So where are we in the history of Acts in the text? First, in chapter 18, verse 22, we read that Paul had returned to Antioch and then he set out again, visiting the disciples in the interior of Asia Minor, away from the coast in 1823 and in 1901.

And then he arrives back in Ephesus, which is back on the coast. And he stays there, as we read, for some time, two or three years. Meanwhile, Apollos, who we'd actually left, just heard about in Ephesus, has moved on across the Aegean to Corinth.

And so in chapter 19, we get this rather graphic account of the somewhat chaotic religious life of Ephesus. Ephesus had declined as a commercial port due to the silting up of its harbour.

[1:38] But it had reinvented itself as a kind of spiritual centre where the economy was dependent on religious tourism. At the centre of this activity, as I said, is the great temple of Artemis, or Diana, as the Romans called her, which had a relic of the goddess, presumably a meteorite, which we're told fell from heaven.

I think it can be translated as fell from Zeus or fell from Jupiter. But it was a rock that came from heaven and was regarded as holy, presumably a meteorite.

But it was considered as a sign of divine favour and divine presence. And as is usually in this sort of place, in this sort of economy, all kinds of spiritual material could be bought and sold here.

Read of souvenirs of Artemis in verse 24, but also manuals of magic, as we read about in verse 19. So in this chapter, Luke presents us really with three pictures of the religious life of this city.

First of all, an inadequate form of Christianity. Secondly, then a particularly weird strain of Judaism. And then the city-sponsored worship of Artemis.

[3:04] Why did Luke tell us these three stories? Well, presumably partly, just as a record of what happened. But I think they do have a sort of link, in one sense.

Because they deal with issues of the nature of spiritual power. And the interplay between religion, economics and politics. And it's into this complex spiritual environment that Paul aims to bring a voice of reason and persuasion.

Notice in verses 8 and 10, that's what he does. So it's worth examining these three pictures, just to see what they've got to tell us. And then we'll reflect on Luke's understanding of significance of history.

So, just to give them headings, I've called the first one Spiritual Baptism. The second one, Spiritual Authority. And then Spiritual Kitsch.

I hope you know what the word kitsch means. It's a German word originally. Much used in English for anything that's... Souvenirs of a place, usually slightly tacky and a bit down market.

[4:12] You get what are called kit shops, which sell these souvenirs. And that's pretty much what was being pushed out in Ephesus.

So let's look at these three passages and then make a few reflections on Luke's... What Luke's teaching us from this history. I won't say much about these first few verses, which are about the baptism of John.

Because actually we looked at this last week. How John's baptism was a baptism for repentance. But it was the Lord Jesus Christ who was baptised in the Holy Spirit. But this very much repeats the same thing. Presumably these 12 disciples have been left over from Apollos' ministry when he had been in Ephesus.

As we described in the previous chapter in verses 24 to 26. So let's just remind ourselves here that John himself, John the Baptist, told us that Jesus will baptise in the Holy Spirit.

[5:22] And it's clear this is Luke's main focus here in verse 6. And he wants us to understand, I'm sure, that spiritual power, genuine spiritual power comes from God.

It's not from rituals like just an immersion in water. And as we'll go on to say it's not from magic either. But in Luke's narrative this incident serves in a sense as a kind of preamble to the story of the sons of Sceva.

But before we get that we just get a brief reminder in verses 8 to 10. That Paul always went to the Jews first. It was always his habit whenever he went to a new town or city.

To go to the synagogue first. The message had to be preached to the Jews first. It was only when they rejected it in the sense that it could be preached to the Greeks, to the Gentiles.

But verses 8 to 10 pretty much a repeat of what's happened in most of the cities Paul's visited. He goes to preach in a synagogue. A few people believe.

[6:34] Most of them don't. And so they throw him out of the synagogue. And he finds somewhere else to speak. And this time he actually goes to the extent of renting a lecture hall.

Presumably he had to pay rent for it unless somebody donated it. And for two whole years lectured in the hall of Tyrannus.

So let's now look in a bit more detail about this second section from verses 11 to 13.

And we notice the discussion starts with actually a rather bland description of some miraculous signs. Blakelock in his commentary points out that Luke in a sense neither condemns nor particularly advocates this business of using handkerchiefs and aprons to heal the sick and cast out evil spirits.

It's almost as though he acknowledges it's a work of God. But at the same time he's almost slightly embarrassed about the way it gets misinterpreted.

[7:42] The essence of Paul's method as we've seen was persuasion using words. But at the same time there were certainly miraculous signs which emphasised the spiritual power behind Paul's words.

Luke is very careful to point out that these signs are not done by Paul but by God through the hands of Paul. Because actually these signs could be and in fact were misunderstood.

To the superstitious Ephesians they didn't look so much like the work of God as some kind of magic. And it's clear that this confusion existed in the minds of these sons of Sceva that we read about.

It appears that these men were genuine Levites. They may even have been descendants of Aaron. So they had a religious pedigree. But they weren't really making good use of it.

In fact they were using that as a kind of front for a rather dubious exorcism business. It seems. Probably Luke means to suggest that they were using magical methods.

[8:58] There's clearly a connection intended between this incident and what he says at the end of the passage about all the magical books being burned by those who were converted.

And this passage is almost a rerun, isn't it, of Simon's reaction to the coming of the Spirit in chapter 8. When Peter performs miraculous signs and Simon the magus wants to buy into this and have the same power.

It seems that these men saw in Paul's message a method that promised to actually work. They may have been tried to cast out demons or say in some sort of exorcism business.

Some sort of scam basically. But then why perpetrate a scam if you could provide the actual genuine service, I suppose is what they were thinking. But it doesn't work, does it?

In fact their scheme goes badly wrong. That's what Luke tells us in verse 18. And interestingly it's the evil spirit himself who proclaims their folly.

[10:11] And the wording here actually of what the Spirit says is very precise and it's a little bit difficult to catch in translation. If we sort of expand it a bit.

He starts by saying Jesus, I know. And the word he uses there is ginosko. Ginosko, which is a Greek word that implies a very intimate knowledge.

The word is also used in Greek actually as a euphemism for sexual relations. It implies a sort of knowledge that's very intimate.

It seems an odd thing for an evil spirit to say. He can't be talking I guess about a good kind of knowledge here. But perhaps he's indicating that this spirit feels the power of Jesus to the very core of his being.

The sons of Sceva don't really understand who it is they're invoking. But the spirit does. He feels Jesus' power.

[11:18] And then he talks about Paul. And the word he uses there is a different word. It means epistami. It's epistami which has the more meaning of getting something in the right place in your mind.

The root meaning of the word is to put something in the right place. It means to gain understanding. And so the translators translate it something like I know about Paul or I recognize Paul.

I understand where Paul is coming from as it were. I'm from somewhere Mark.

Right. So with regard to Paul he says I understand where Paul's coming from. So we might sort of expand this phrase of the spirit a bit.

I know all about Jesus. And I guess I understand how Paul fits into the picture. But why on earth should I take any notice of you guys? They didn't have any idea of who it was they were really invoking.

[12:34] They just thought it was some sort of magical incantation. And the spirit simply ignores it. Well he doesn't ignore it actually does he? He drives them away.

It has no power over him. There are one or two other interesting points about this story.

Because you notice there's actually no happy ending. You might have thought that Luke would have said oh but Paul came and drove out the spirit. But in fact he didn't.

Or he certainly doesn't say he did. We leave this story with the evil spirit apparently triumphant. Neither were we told actually how Luke came upon this story.

Although it certainly sounds doesn't it like an eyewitness account. We know that Luke was very careful to check up on his details. It certainly sounds like an eyewitness account.

[13:38] He says he has written an orderly account in Luke 1 verse 3 so that we may learn from it. So magic is supposed to work by the will and authority of the magician.

Or alternatively by special words and rituals. Only magic doesn't actually work. Or if it does it does it by demonic power.

Spiritual power. Real spiritual power. Comes from God. And comes from the authority of Jesus. Not even Paul can claim it is his own right.

The spirit acknowledges Paul as a servant of Jesus. But the power itself. Comes from Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit. And people did learn from the story.

Even though as I say in a sense there's no happy ending. Because people came to understand that actually all this magical paraphernalia that they'd paid a lot of money for.

[14:45] Was actually so much expensive junk. So instead of a happy ending. The story ends with a rather expensive bonfire.

As a destruction of all these works of magic. The real source of spiritual power Luke is telling us. Is the word of the Lord.

Verse 20. So when the word of the Lord. Let's just. Just read it to you again.

Verse 20. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely. And grew in power. So let's move on now to this third section.

This third picture of religion in Ephesus. And again I think the burning of these magical books takes us a kind of link into the third narrative.

[15:54] Because it pertains to the temple which is at the heart of the city. The temple of Artemis. And what we find here is that much as we

like to separate things out.

Actually you can't. In the real world. Religion and economics and politics and law and even civic pride. Are all tied and mixed up together aren't they?

They're all inextricably tangled. And so we read about this silversmith Demetrius. Presumably the leader of the guild of silversmiths in the city.

And what's he find? He's obviously worried that his trade is going to suffer. His first concern is actually economic. If you notice in verses 23 and 25. Trade will decline.

But it's all mixed up with other stuff isn't it? It's mixed in with theological issues. With civic pride. Perhaps he even had some genuine loyalty to his goddess.

[17:02] We don't know. Actually you can't fault his analysis can you? What he says is pretty much correct. When the gospel is taken seriously.

All the things he lists in verses 25 to 27 will indeed be consequences of it. It's actually foolish to suggest that the gospel has no cultural impact.

It clearly does. And yet the gospel is transformational. Not destructive. If there was a guild of silversmiths in Ephesus.

If they turned to Christ. They would still have those skills. They would just be using their skills to make something useful and probably more beautiful as well.

Well. We might contrast that with the politically correct idea of not interfering in cultures today.

[18:06] Because it's just impossible. If you declare all cultures equal. Actually what you end up doing is devaluing all of them. And that's exactly what we see isn't it?

That nothing has any meaning. No culture has any real value if they never mean anything. And I think. Personally I think political correctness does a great deal of damage to the way that we look at our culture and other cultures.

That's something one could discuss at another time perhaps. But one thing that's certainly true. We can't avoid making moral and even making aesthetic judgments about cultures.

It's very foolish to try. And certainly the gospel comes. When the gospel comes it does transform cultures as well as individuals. So as I say you can't really fault Demetrius' analysis.

He may have some logic on his side when it comes to the economics. But he's not it seems prepared to resort to persuasion or to the courts to make his case.

[19:16] Which as verse 39 points out was what he should have done. But he may have thought that suppressing public debate in the interest of guild protectionism is always going to be a difficult case to make.

So instead he resorts to rousing a rabble. And instead of persuasion reason gives way to slogan shouting.

Actually Demetrius is quite clever in the way he does it. He starts a riot but tries to make Jews in general and Paul in particular take the blame for it.

If you read what he actually says. And actually given the unrest that we know there was in Rome and in Corinth. Where there had already been anti-Christian riots.

And protests. It's actually quite a savvy tactic. But in this case you notice it doesn't quite come off. Because Demetrius loses control of the mob.

[20:19] And the result becomes civic chaos. The crowd is in no mood at all for a rational discussion.

Verse 34 all they can do is shout slogans. Great is Diana of the Ephesians. They believe that both their cultural pride and their economic livelihood have been attacked.

The situation is very dangerous. It seems that even Paul's reaction seems a bit hot-headed to his friends.

He wants to go and speak to the crowd. But his friends say no that's just going to inflame the situation. And we notice that Paul isn't without friends. Even among the ruling classes.

They actually it seems fear a lynching. They actually fear lynching. So what happens? The situation was pretty bad.

[21:20] Mercifully for all concerned. Turns out there's a civil servant. Who unlike the behaviour we normally criticise civil servants for.

Was very much on the ball. He certainly earned his wages that day didn't he? He earned his pay that day. You might imagine what happened when he went home in the evening.

It must have been an interesting conversation with his wife. He said hello dear. How was work today? He said oh well pretty much the usual. I had to quell a riot. He certainly did his job that day. Blake the commentator calls him an admirable official. I think one would have to agree with that assessment. He calms down the crowd. Puts an altogether different spin on things.

He starts doesn't he? By calming their civic pride. Everybody knows that Ephesus is the site of the temple of Artemis. The whole Roman world is aware.

[22:28] That's why they're all coming here. And if she is a goddess with an image sent from Zeus. How can she be harmed by an itinerant preacher?

It is true that Paul is preaching a kind of monotheism. But Jews were allowed to do that by Roman law anyway. And the town clerk is very clear that Paul hasn't directly blasphemed the goddess.

He certainly hasn't robbed her temple. The word there literally means temple robbing. It can more generally mean sacrilegious.

But the meaning clearly is that he hasn't done any damage to the temple. It's not as if he's gone in there and started throwing things or breaking things or stealing things.

And then we get to the town clerk's crucial argument. The Roman crackdown is actually far more harmful to the city than anything Paul could do.

[23:38] And if Demetrius has a problem with that, then there are the proper channels to go through. So those are the three pictures of religious life in Ephesus that Luke gives us.

And in a sense, it's a bit tricky, isn't it, in one sense, to see what is it exactly we're supposed to learn from this passage. I think we need to reflect on it a bit.

There's no sort of simple text, no strapline where we can say this summarizes the whole argument of the passage.

In fact, that's not really the way that Luke writes. It's interesting to compare, actually. Two of the gospel writers tell us why they wrote them.

John tells us, These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

[24:43] That's what John said, John 20, 31, was why he wrote his book. Luke actually puts a slightly different slant on it. He tells us in Luke 1, verses 3 to 4, why he wrote his book, or two books, as it turned out.

And it says, Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also for me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Paul says he's writing an orderly account. He's writing history. He's just going to tell you what happened, not much more. But he's doing it so that you may know the certainty of the things you've been taught.

And so we need to look at this history and learn from it, the certainty of the things that have been taught. And Acts, of course, is just volume 2 of Luke's gospel, and has the same aim.

We were thinking a couple of weeks ago about the differences between the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews. And I think it's probably fair to say that John, although John is well acquainted with Greek philosophy, but John writes as a Hebraic Jew.

[26:08] He wants us to be sure that Jesus is indeed the one promised by the prophets. And Luke, perhaps, has much more of a general Hellenist approach.

He wants us to trace the hand of God in history. And it's even interesting if you compare the various descriptions in the Gospels of Christ's birth.

There are two, of course. I can't describe it in any detail, in Matthew and in Luke. How does Matthew start his description? by giving a genealogy, doesn't he?

He traces the descent of Jesus from Abraham, particularly via David. He wants us to see, Matthew wants us to see, that this is the king in the line of David, and that the time when the kingdom was to be established.

But Luke starts his description of the birth of Christ in a different way. He embeds it, not in Jewish history, but actually in Roman history.

[27:15] So in Luke 2, verse 1, he says, In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

Apparently nothing to do with the history of the Messiah.

It's about a Roman king, a Roman emperor. And yet Luke is telling us that even through that act of that pagan emperor, that the work of God was being carried out, and that's how Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem, where he should have been born as a descendant of David, rather than in Nazareth.

Luke wants us to understand the place of Jesus in the flow, not of just Jewish history, but actually, I think, of world history. And so he mentions a lot of real people.

He mentions Jews and Gentiles, Romans, you can look up in the secular histories. People whose names, many of them would have heard of, his hearers would have heard of, and if they didn't, they could certainly look them up.

And he mentions a lot of real places. So Luke wants us to learn from history and understand Jesus' place, not even just in the history of the Jews, but in the history of the world.

[28:43] And of course, the other feature of Luke's accounts particularly, is this emphasis of the Holy Spirit.

Luke has been called the apostle of the Holy Spirit. And it's when the Spirit comes in Acts 2, the international mission of the church is set in motion, isn't it?

We're told that the gospel must go to Jews first, but even in Jewish rejection of the Messiah, the hand of God may be traced. And so the gospel goes, first of all, from Judea to Samaria, and then out to the uttermost parts of the world.

The Spirit works from within history. Consider those dozen disciples in verses 1 to 7. They're victims, aren't they, of an inadequate doctrine.

When does the Spirit come? The Spirit waits, doesn't he, until Paul has explained things more carefully and baptized them in the name of Jesus.

[29:51] And then the Holy Spirit comes on them. The Spirit doesn't act in an arbitrary manner. He comes with and through the word.

And yes, through baptism, but he comes in the laying on of hands. He comes firstly with the word because it is the Spirit who brings the word and authenticates it in people's hearts.

And the account of the sons of Sceva, I think, is a kind of counterpoint to this because it reminds us that the Spirit is not some magical force. It's not constrained and manipulated by human words or rituals.

And how much there is a temptation sometimes, even among those in the name of Christ, to manipulate the Holy Spirit, think the Holy Spirit comes at their desire and command.

But what does Jesus himself say? John 3.8 says, The Spirit blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell, sorry, the wind blows wherever it pleases.

[31:00] Same word in Greek, of course. So the Spirit blows or the wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

which is the Spirit who is sovereign. We can't tame the Holy Spirit to our own desires and our own uses, which is the Holy Spirit who tames us, as it were, to his service and makes us fit for service.

So can we gain wisdom by looking at history? History. Hegel said, wasn't it? I think it was Hegel, said history teaches us that history teaches us nothing.

But I hope that isn't the case. I hope we can learn from looking at history. And wisdom comes from some unlikely sources sometimes, doesn't it?

If you're familiar with the book of Numbers, in Numbers 22, wisdom comes from the actions and mouth of a donkey. Not where you'd normally look for wisdom, I guess. And it's a bit like that in this passage.

[32:17] Wisdom comes, bizarrely even, apparently from an unclean spirit, from some local aristocrats, from a pagan civil servant.

But it remains wisdom. As I said, spiritual power isn't something under magical human control. It comes from the Trinitarian God. And the gospel method is persuasion, not coercion.

Coercion itself can take many forms. Sometimes it's the attempt to use magic. Sometimes it's the attempt for mob rule.

But the spirit is sovereign over these things. And wisdom understands that. Wisdom understands that God's method is persuasion. The word authenticated by the spirit.

And that God is sovereign over history. And that's actually why history matters. If there is no God, then in a sense you can't learn anything from history because it has no meaning.

[33:22] But if history is the story of God's working amongst the humankind, then it has every meaning.

It's because God is in control of history, is sovereign over history, that history matters and it's worth studying it. And what else can we say?

Well, the gospel method is persuasion. Peace and the rule of law are on the whole its friends. Not always, of course. Sometimes the law can be exploited against the word of God.

And indeed, about reading historians. I've just been reading a little booklet which I found on Tacitus about the burning of Rome in the time of Nero.

And it explains how, although Tacitus is no friend of Christians, by the way, he calls it a superstition. And yet, he condemns the way in which Nero burns Christians, persecutes Christians as a political gimmick to deflect the attention from his own failings.

[34:39] So, peace, the rule of law, are not always helping, helpful towards the word of God, but in general, they are. It's much better if there is peace and order in a society because then the word of the Lord is not hindered.

And certainly, Christians need to take warning not to resort to rousing a mob while claiming the name of Christ.

And you might say, well, that will never happen. But unfortunately, there are notorious examples in history where it has happened and there's always been a disaster.

just to mention a couple of examples. Right back in 415 AD in Alexandria, a mob murdered the Greek philosopher Hypatia, a mob that claimed to be claiming the name of Christ.

But there's nothing Christian about such behavior at all. during the Reformation, there was mob rule in the German town of Munster and terrible things were done.

[36:08] And of course, most people have heard of the Salem witch trials which even godly pastors were killed because of mob hysteria or group hysteria when the mob was roused.

We need to be particularly careful not to indulge in any form of rabble rousing or mob psychology because that is not the way Christ works.

Yes, sometimes he comes with signs of power, certainly, but it is primarily through his words that the spirit works.

So like Paul, we need to be absolutely squeaky clean from all taint of riot and lawlessness.

Demetrius made his charge, but it didn't stick. Town clerk said there's no evidence.

He's not done anything to attack the temple of Artemis or even blaspheme the goddess directly.

There's no riot. It's Demetrius who's raising a riot, not Paul.

[37:30] But then there's more than we could say. We shouldn't forget, I think, that Christianity isn't rebellious, it isn't revolutionary, but it is subversive.

We shouldn't forget that perhaps. After all, Demetrius' words became true, didn't they? There's no Artemis worshippers in Ephesus today.

It's just a ruin temple. Still depends, I suppose, on the tourist trade largely, but people go there now to see a ruin. I don't doubt there are still kit shops in Ephesus, but they don't sell living symbols of the goddess Artemis.

The gospel does aim to bring societies and not just individuals under the rule of Christ. I think one has to acknowledge that that happens necessarily when the gospel is preached.

Cultures and societies are changed. And it's true, this won't be complete until the revealing of the holy city. And some people have said, well, should we be doing this?

[38:42] Why polish the brass on a sinking ship? Well, there's some truth in that, but I think that that doesn't say we shouldn't do what we can.

I mean, let me suggest an argument to you. None of us is going to be perfect until we are in that heavenly city. until we are purified by Christ, sanctified by Christ, finally, fully.

But would anybody say, well, that means it doesn't matter what we do now? Some people have said that, of course, we were thinking about that this morning, but not many Christians would argue that, I think. There's no point in trying to be holy now, because it won't be perfect.

That's just not the way the Bible thinks at all. We'll not be fully holy now, but we are trying to work towards being fully sanctified in the upward call of Christ.

I don't see why you should think of it as any different when we pray, as Jeremiah says, for the peace of the city. We can do what we can now, because history does have meaning.

[39:55] History is the work of God for mankind, so we do what we can. call on societies to be holy, as well as individuals.

Even though it will never be perfect, it does have meaning, because remember that in Revelation it says that the wealth of nations will be taken into the city, yet nothing unholy will ever enter it.

God. So let me just finish with these words of Paul. This is 2 Corinthians 10, verse 5, when he explains what he thinks he's doing when he's teaching, lecturing in the Hall of Tyrannus and so on.

And he was writing to Corinthians not very far away from Ephesus, just on that little boat trip across the Aegean. And Paul writes, we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Brothers and sisters, we live in a complicated world, just as Paul did, but that gives us quite a lot of scope, I think, whether we're involved directly in preaching the gospel, whether we're involved in politics or academia, or whatever it is we're doing, really, we can be in the business of demolishing arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God.

[41:38] And we take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ. Amen. Let's say. Let's say. Let's say.