

The Continuing Acts of Jesus: The Gospel and...

Acts 18:24-23:22

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If you've been with us over the last several months you know that we are in the book of Acts. In fact we've been in Acts since February so we are getting close to the end. In the beginning we were going verse by verse, but the book of Acts changes about half way through, and so as we've gotten into Paul's mission trips we've picked up speed considerably. So three weeks ago we covered his first trip around Asia, two weeks ago we covered his second trip. Last week Spencer preached. And today we are covering Paul's third and longest trip all in one week.

It spans six chapters, but we are covering it all today as Paul travels through Macedonia and Greece before heading back to Jerusalem. Now this is really 10 messages, so I have no choice but to try to get you out of here just before dinner.

Nervous chuckles – “would he do that to us?” No, I'm just going to focus in on four things that the gospel transforms as it spread through Asia.

So let's get started in Acts 18 starting in verse 24 with the gospel coming face to face with ignorance.

[Read Acts 18:24-25]

Now Apollos was an incredible speaker. He had the gift of the gab. Maybe you know someone like this. Whenever they are around everyone has a good time because they know just what to say to make people feel comfortable. It's a gift. Apollos was like this, and on top of that he was a learned man. He knew the scriptures. He knew about Jesus, and he could preach!

But what we find here is that there was a hole in Apollos' theology. He only knew John's baptism. So Apollos was baptized by John. He was one of his disciples. And he hadn't moved on from there.

Now John was a great guy. He was the forerunner for Jesus. He came preparing the way of the Lord. And he preached about repentance. And this is what Apollos was preaching. And he was doing a great job. Except that his message was incomplete.

Apollos was preaching an insufficient gospel. There was no Holy Spirit; there was no regeneration. And that's problematic.

Apollos was a gifted man with insufficient information. He was learned but ignorant. And he didn't know what he didn't know. But then he bumps into some incredible Jesus people. Look at verse 26.

[Read Acts 18:26]

Now leaving the Apostles aside for a minute, Priscilla and Aquila are some of the most powerful and passionate preachers and teachers in the New Testament. They pop up in several of the epistles,¹ and the interesting thing about them is that the Scriptures almost always puts Priscilla, the woman, first. She was the main teacher of the two of them, and Aquila backed her up.

And so here Priscilla and Aquila take Apollos aside. They recognize he has a gift; they recognize the Spirit is on him, and so they invest in him by unpacking and explaining the full counsel of God. They told him the good news “more adequately.”

Now the fact is nobody has a full grasp on the Truth because Jesus is the Truth and nobody can get their heads completely around Him. All of us have deficiencies in our understanding. But Jesus, by His Spirit, has made it possible for us to know enough about Him. And so here the learned man gets schooled. And he submits. This is the beauty of the gospel. Usually learned people aren't teachable. But when the gospel gets into a person it frees them from pride and brings life. In the light of Truth, transformation happens.

And so Apollos responds to the truth of the gospel, and immediately gets to work using the gifts the Spirit has given him. Verse 27

[Read Acts 18:27-28]

Now Apollos, the Jesus man, is on mission. He's not ignorant of the Spirit anymore. And so here starts unpacking his newly embraced gospel and shining the light of Christ into Achaia. The truth of the gospel delivers people from ignorance.

But there is another aspect of ignorance being overcome by the gospel here too. And that is the ignorant fear of the unknown.

So there were believers in Achaia already. They had a church there. Paul had established it during his second mission trip. And so they had their own leaders, and their own communities already. And then this new guy shows up on the scene – Apollos. And he is gifted, and has some serious flare. It would be so easy to keep him on the outside. But he is welcomed in Achaia because of a reference letter.

So the letter said something like “This is Apollos. Jesus has been doing something awesome in him. So get behind him with your support.”

And that was all that was required. People were so excited to participate with the new stuff God was doing – they wanted to see His kingdom grow – and they had such high esteem for each other, that when the brothers and sisters in Corinth endorsed Apollos and his ministry the brothers and sisters all over Achaia embraced it.

¹ Acts 18; Romans 16:4; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19

Now this is something we are going to come back to a couple times today, but one of the problems in the North American church is a deep sense of individuality that we've grown up with. This is part of our culture. We come from pioneers, so we are used to doing things ourselves. And the result of this is that sometimes our first concern can be "If I support this new ministry is it going to be good for my kingdom and my church's kingdom?" Instead of "If I support this new ministry is it going to be good for Jesus' kingdom and the expanse of His glory?"

Now the reality is often the answer to both these questions is "yes" – "yes, the growth of God's kingdom in one demographic of the city is good for the growth of God's kingdom in another." But it is important to ask the right question first. Jesus people are people whose first concern is His kingdom, not their own. And this is what was going on here with Apollos. Nobody allowed fear of the unknown, that perhaps Apollos' ministry would eclipse their own, to keep them from getting behind what Jesus was doing through this brother.

The truth of the gospel destroys ignorance in individuals and communities.

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Now look down at chapter 19 verse 11 and we will get into the second point of opposition the gospel encountered on this trip. Paul is in Ephesus at this point, and the Spirit is moving through his ministry. And then we come across one of the comic relief passages in the Bible. You need to read this story with excitement.

[Read Acts 19:11-20]

In this passage the gospel goes head to head with syncretism. Now Syncretism is the practice of combining the best of multiple belief systems.

So there are these traveling Jewish exorcists running around Ephesus. Nobody really knows what the story is on these guys, or what they were doing. But there was certainly some mysticism involved. They had elevated themselves to renown by their spiritual practices.

And then they catch wind of Paul and his ministry and they are impressed and so they say "We've got a good gig going on here, but maybe we can make it better by adding a bit of Jesus to it." And so they try to exercise demons "In the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches."

Now here is the crazy thing about this. They see the power of Jesus; they see it is more than what they've got; but they aren't interested in being transformed by the Spirit into Jesus followers. Instead they just want to incorporate the parts of Jesus they like into their existing system of beliefs.

And this is what syncretism is. It is the combining of truths from different taps. And our world is full of this right now. People are spiritual, but they want to make their own spirituality. So people say I like the dedication of Islam and the meditation of Eastern mysticism. Jesus said some great stuff too, so I'll take His teaching, but I'm leaving Paul out because I don't agree with everything he says. And I'll top this all off with a little all embracing Bahai thought.

And the feeling behind syncretism is that by diversifying and taking what I believe is the best in these different religions I will come up with something that works for me.

Now this is really popular in 21st century Canada. People are narrow minded if they don't do this. You are some redneck religious fundamentalist. But the problem with this – actually there are all sorts of problems with this – but the two big ones are first that you've made yourself god in your religion. You are the one who decides what truth is, and it is your will that is most important. But this means you have nowhere to go when you come to the end of yourself. And this makes your religion empty.

But the second problem that syncretism fails to comprehend is that truths from different streams aren't compatible; they are mutually exclusive. So Eastern meditation says by carefully calming your mind and quieting your soul you can get in touch with the universe's life force, but this clashes with Jesus' claim that He is "the way, the truth and the life, [and] no one comes to the Father except through [Him]."²

And so it is impossible to add anything to the gospel. Jesus is the one who secures us and ransoms us. He is the source of our hope and the author of our faith. So whatever you add to Him ends up taking away.

And so when these Jewish traveling exorcists attempt to add the name of Jesus to their arsenal they haven't gained authority over the demonic, they've lost any they had – I have no idea how they were doing exorcisms before. But they sure weren't doing them anymore.

The demon says "I know who Jesus is, and I've heard of Paul, but you can't reference these names like magic incantations and expect to harness their power. You can't add Jesus to your bag of tricks. It's either all Jesus, or none of Him at all." There is no room for syncretism in the gospel.

And so the demon possessed man lays a lickin' on these seven sons of Sceva. Now often in a fight there is a debate about who won. At least all the fights I witnessed in elementary school were like this: "I had you, I let you go." That kind of thing. But if you start a fight wearing pants and at the end you don't have them anymore, you lost that fight. No one gives up their pants by choice. Luke wants us to know adding a little Jesus onto the rest of your beliefs – syncretism – has no power.

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² John 14:6

Let's move on from here to another great story as the gospel comes face to face with consumerism. This is the Demetrius riot that picks up in verse 23.

[Read Acts 19:23-27]

Notice how in verse 23 the Way, which is what people were calling Christianity at this time, causes a disturbance in the financial district.

So Artemis was a goddess worshipped by the Romans. In fact she was the dominant deity in the area. If you google "seven wonders of the ancient world" Artemis' temple is on the list. And that temple was in Ephesus.

And Demetrius is the chief silversmith in the area. So he is in charge of manufacturing and distributing silver idols for the worship of Artemis. And just like with the seven traveling Jewish exorcists, Demetrius notices that the gospel is making waves. It isn't a neutral force. People who encounter Jesus don't just keep living life as normal, they are transformed. And this transformation is having a negative impact on his business.

And here we learn a bit about Demetrius and his capitalistic consumerism from the way he lays out his argument. Now I use these terms a bit tongue and cheek because capitalism and consumerism in the first century were nothing like they are today. But there are seeds of them here.

And so Demetrius' first concern is that the income he and his fellow silversmiths had been bringing in had diminished because people weren't believing in Artemis anymore. The Way was causing waves.

But here is the irony; Demetrius doesn't really believe in Artemis either. He says he is concerned for her divine majesty, but if she has divine majesty she can take care of herself. So that's not his main concern, and that's why he only brings it up at the end of his tirade. Really Demetrius is about the money. He's a capitalist. But he's not dumb. He realizes that the Way transforms people. When the gospel gets into people they start doing life together, and proclaiming life to each other. And this impacts what they spend their money on. When the gospel goes head to head with consumerism it frees people from bondage to capitalistic, consumeristic idolatry.

And it's not hard to see why. As followers of Jesus what we live in is freedom and abundant life right now followed by eternal abundant life later. There is no trade off. It's not misery now for eternal life when we die. We get it all.

Now I'm not saying following Jesus is about health, wealth and wisdom – it's not. But Jesus says "I made the world, and so I know how it works best, and so if you want to really live then give your life to Me. You don't have to try to buy happiness anymore. I've come that you might have life, and have it to the full!"³

³ John 10:10

And this is why Jesus followers can live in a way the world doesn't understand. We are free to serve those around us, and give our resources and our time to the hurting, broken and unlovable. We can do all this because we aren't tied to the gods of this world which, if we can purchase what they are selling, promise life but end up binding.

And this lie is rampant today. Friends, right now Canadians have the highest household debt we have ever had. We are the richest people who have ever lived, and yet we are financially enslaved because we've given ourselves to the gods of capitalistic consumerism.

But when the gospel goes head to head with consumerism it points people to real life. Jesus followers know our joy doesn't come from stuff it comes from our Saviour. And so when the gospel gets into us it frees us to give our resources and our money, and our time away to those in need. And when we do this we break the chains of consumerism and find freedom.

But people in the world aren't comfortable with this kind of freedom. The Way makes waves. And so in a desperate financial move, in the next few verses, these silversmiths incite a riot by convincing the people that Paul is belittling Artemis.

Now Paul probably never even mentioned Artemis. He was too busy talking about Jesus and the good news of abundant life. But the crowd buys Demetrius' lie and goes crazy. They start yelling and screaming; they grab a few members of Paul's team, and drag them into the theater for judge, jury and execution. That's their plan. But it's such a ruckus that the magistrate shuts it down, not because he's a fan of the Way, but because he is worried the Romans are going to come shut the city down for rioting.

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As I was studying this I wondered about myself, "Do my spending habits prove to my neighbours that I serve a different God than they do?" Do our consumeristic neighbours know our priorities are different from theirs? Or do we come across simply looking like nice people. In Ephesus the followers of the Way caused a great financial disturbance. So let's ask ourselves, am I living in a way that causes a Jesus disturbance in Prince George? Do I give my time and money to things my neighbours can't understand because I want to be part of what Jesus is doing in the city?

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The final conflict I want to draw out for you today is between the gospel and internal church opposition. Look with me down at chapter 20 starting in verse 25:

[Read Acts 20:25-31]

When the gospel breaks into people it destroys ignorance, it trumps syncretism, it causes a disturbance amidst consumerism and it guards against internal opposition.

Now just before this Paul has told his friends that he is going to leave and they aren't going to see him again. And he means in the earthly sense. Paul knows he is heading to eternal life. But on earth he was never going to see his friends again.

And these were close friends. We do church once a week, or two times a week if you are in a small group, or perhaps three times a week if you come to morning prayer. But in verse 31 Paul reminds these people that he has been with them night and day for three years. They've been sharing their resources. They've been taking care of each other's needs. They've been confessing their sins to each other and growing in honest community. And now Paul tells them God is leading him on to Jerusalem.

And he's not going to Jerusalem on a cruise ship for some R&R, he is going there to be handed over to Rome and killed for his faith. He knows this – the Spirit has spoken it to him. But he knows he has to go.

And out of the seriousness of that conversation he warns the elders in Ephesus to guard themselves against savage wolves.

Now when we hear this we are no doubt prone to think this is persecution. Someone is coming to destroy the church – they are the savage wolves. But Paul says these wolves will arise from among the believers. And so their attack won't be to start crucifying Christians, it will be to distort the truth.

And here is where ignorance and syncretism and consumerism sneak in again. These things are comfortable to us. And so what these savage wolves are doing is encouraging the rest of the body to move away from having their eyes fixed on increasing Jesus' kingdom and expanding His glory at all cost. And they are encouraging them towards what is more comfortable.⁴ It's just a small gospel distortion.

But a little distortion is a big deal. And Paul says it is going to come. So be prepared for it. People always grow lenient of sin, and comfortable with the norms of society, and apathetic about the growth of God's kingdom. And so the default is for the church to move in these directions instead of in line with the gospel.

In fact this is exactly what happened in Ephesus. We know this because about fifty years later when the Apostle John was writing Revelation he recorded Jesus' words to this church saying:

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for My name, and have not grown weary.

⁴ Compare this thought with Jeremiah 28:1-9

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. (Revelation 2:1-5)

Ephesus was a faithful church who had persevered and endured. But they had lost their passion for allowing the gospel to radically challenge the norms of life around them. They had lost their first love. And here Jesus says just this is one thing you can't let go of. Your passion has to be shining the light of Christ into the community you've been placed in at all cost. Don't get comfortable. Don't get syncretistic, don't give in to the consumerism around you. Get back to loving Jesus and the expanse of His kingdom that's the only thing that matters.

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And this is where I want to leave us today. Fort George is a church with a history of passionately pursuing the things of God in this city. This history goes all the way back to Pastor Hagar at the turn of the 20th century. It's a great history. But Jesus wants us to have a great present as well. And so He has placed an opportunity before us to participate in the expanse of His kingdom in 2017.

And so we were supposed to have a town hall meeting after the service today to talk about Lighthouse, but we've had to postpone that because Rob, who is the chair of our deacon's board, is down in Vancouver with his parents. His mom is in hospice and it looks like this is the transition into eternity for her. So we are going to have this meeting when he gets back. We are aiming for Sunday November 19th now.

But we as Deacons and Committee and Lighthouse are looking forward to sharing several exciting things with you. We are seeing young people come to Jesus here Saturday night. And we are seeing an increased interest in church from kids in a generation that is largely absent from the church nation wide. And yet we are seeing these young people come out to give themselves in worship to Jesus. It's exciting!

And at this Town Hall we will give you the opportunity to ask any questions you have on your mind. We can't promise we can answer them – we are still pretty new at this – but we will try.

Our main heart, and excitement, in all this is to come together as a church and figure out how we can keep participating with something Jesus seems to be doing all over the city right now. Friends, there is an interest in the gospel among the young people of Prince George today. It's going on at the College and in the High Schools. It's going on in several other churches. And it appears Jesus has given Fort George the opportunity to give ourselves, once again, to our first love – which is shining the light of Christ into this great city He has placed us in.