

The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

***“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it –
but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”***

Vance Havner

Text

Acts 19:8-20

Topic

God breaks the Ephesians of their superstitions after the seven sons of Sceva fail miserably to exorcise a demon using the names of Jesus and Paul

Title

An Exorcise In Futility

Acts 19:8 And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God.

Acts 19:9 But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.

Acts 19:10 And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.

Acts 19:11 Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul,

Acts 19:12 so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them.

Acts 19:13 Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches."

Acts 19:14 Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so.

Acts 19:15 And the evil spirit answered and said, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?"

Acts 19:16 Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

Acts 19:17 This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified.

Acts 19:18 And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds.

Acts 19:19 Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned *them* in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and *it* totaled fifty thousand *pieces* of silver.

Acts 19:20 So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

Introduction

I found a *Fake Miracles and Trinkets* webpage¹. Scrolling down I read about the following items:

1. The Faith Nail. It was a nail similar in style to the ones that were used to nail Jesus to the Cross. You were instructed to write out your needs on a prayer list and then pierce it with the nail. Afterwards (and I quote) “Place your best sacrificial gift in the enclosed envelope and send the offering and your prayer requests in the return envelope.” (Rex Humbard).
2. The Paper Prayer Rug. It was a 16”x20” picture of Jesus you were to spread over your knees while kneeling to pray. Then you placed it folded in your Bible overnight. In the morning you were to return it – again with a generous financial offering. (Oral Roberts).

In addition to these there were many prayer cloths offered over the years. All had similar instructions about sending in your money.

But wait a minute. Before we discount these as frauds, didn’t God heal in Ephesus using the **handkerchiefs and aprons** of the apostle Paul?

He did and we must therefore give an answer for why He did.

The answer is not so hard to find. It has to do with the spiritual atmosphere of the city of Ephesus. It was a hotbed of occult beliefs and practices. God chose an unusual strategy to deconstruct their ideas about the spiritual world. It revealed to the Ephesians that the

¹ <http://www.bible.ca/tongues-photogallery-pentecostal-trinkets.htm>

power of the Word of God and the presence of the Spirit of God are more than sufficient in every situation.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Limit Yourself To The Inherent Power Of God's Word, and #2 Submit Yourself To The Indwelling Presence of God's Spirit.

#1 Limit Yourself To The Inherent Power Of God's Word (v8-12)

The Ephesians were fascinated with the occult. They practiced **magic**; they spent a small fortune on occult **books**; and they were a welcome stop over for **itinerant exorcists**. I'm going to suggest to you that God therefore employed a unique strategy to reach them with the message of Jesus Christ.

First let's set the stage.

Acts 19:8 And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God.

The apostle Paul was on his third missionary journey in the city of Ephesus. He reconnected with Aquila and Priscilla whom he had previously left in Ephesus. He supported himself working with them in their trade as tentmakers.

Three months was quite a long time for him to be welcome in a synagogue. He preached the Gospel from the theme of **the kingdom of God**. Undoubtedly he reviewed the Old Testament promises of a literal kingdom on the earth with Jerusalem as its capital. Then he proceeded to show how that Jesus came offering it to the Jews but was rejected by them. The kingdom was therefore postponed until the Second Coming of Jesus. In the mean time the Lord was calling-out people into His church.

Acts 19:9 But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.

Hardened indicates a willful and deliberate refusal to believe. Worse, they blasphemed against the message of the Gospel – here called **the Way**. Paul and the disciples he had made started meeting **daily in the school of Tyrannus**. It was a private lecture hall. Tyrannus was either a rabbi or a philosopher teaching what we would call grad students.

Acts 19:10 And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.

Like many cultures – especially those before or without air conditioning – everyday featured a siesta. Scholars believe Paul used the lecture hall when it was vacant during siesta - from 11am until 2pm. This he did daily for two years.

Talk about dedication – both on Paul’s part and on the part of his disciples. Instead of taking his siesta from the hard labor of tentmaking the apostle poured himself into teaching the Word.

As a result of his faithful, systematic Bible teaching the Word of God spread to all the regions of **Asia Minor**. It was during this time that the church at Colosse was founded and the seven churches of the Revelation (among others).

Something else was going on and it’s reported in verses eleven and twelve: - *being changed to bring change* -

Acts 19:11 Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul,
Acts 19:12 so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them.

Miracles were being performed **by the hands of Paul**. People were being healed and delivered from demons. Nothing new there!

What startles us is the intermediate use of **handkerchiefs** and **aprons**. By **handkerchiefs** is meant the *sweat bands* Paul wore while laboring as a tent maker. Likewise the **aprons** were ones he wore as a workman to wipe the grime off of his hands.

What do we make of this? Does it open the door for the Faith Nail, the Paper Prayer Rug, and special prayer cloths?

Quite the opposite! The Ephesians were steeped in the occult. They had spent a small fortune on books which claimed to teach them how to master spiritual forces. They were always seeking the next bestseller with the latest mystery techniques.

Into their world came the apostle Paul. God chose to use his **handkerchiefs** and **aprons** to heal and deliver. They held his sweat and grime. What did they therefore represent?

They represented the byproducts of Paul's labor in order to teach the Word of God.

I'm suggesting that God used the **handkerchiefs** and **aprons** in a unique way in Ephesus to reach people caught-up in the occult. They would see that real spiritual power is a byproduct of teaching the Word of God. God was, in a sense, condescending to their superstitions in order to break them of their superstitions.

And He did so with humor! Here they were, spending bank on occult books that didn't result in miracles while God allowed the grossest, most common of objects to heal and deliver people.

If this analysis is correct it leads us *away* from the use of intermediate objects, not towards them. Paul simply taught the Word and God did miracles through him. He did not seek after ways to accomplish the miraculous.

If in certain cultures and circumstances God chooses to use unusual methods to reach people, that's His prerogative. But when He does it is to break their superstitions, not establish them. Faith Nails, Paper Prayer Rugs, prayer cloths, and traveling statues are a step back into the occult for us.

The contemporary church should be resolute in refusing to borrow occult ideas and techniques and trying to merge them with biblical Christianity. We can and should limit ourselves to the limitless power inherent in God's Word.

The laughs continue in the next episode in our text.

#2 Submit Yourself To The Indwelling Presence Of God's Spirit (v13-20)

With its fascination for all things occult Ephesus was a haven for practitioners of all kinds. We meet a traveling troupe of Jewish exorcists.

Acts 19:13 Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches."

Acts 19:14 Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so.

Maybe you've seen recreations of exorcisms; or movies that feature exorcisms. There is always a lot of mumbo-jumbo. There are formulas and objects (lots of holy water!) that are deemed 'necessary' to combat the demon or demons.

Paul's success over demons led these ghostbusters to think that he had discovered a new magic formula – **the Jesus whom Paul preaches**. They decided to try it out on an especially difficult case.

Acts 19:15 And the evil spirit answered and said, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?"

Oops! This can only end badly. The **evil spirit** knew Jesus. He knew Jesus was the Son of God and God in human flesh. He knew he must submit to Jesus.

The **evil spirit** knew who Paul was. Paul was a saved man who was indwelt by God the Holy Spirit. The **evil spirit** knew he must submit to Paul.

But these exorcists did *not* even know Jesus and were *not* indwelt by the Spirit of God. They had no power over him. He need not submit to them. In fact, it made him mad.

Acts 19:16 Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

These guys got a whoopin! They got beat up, beat down, and had their clothes torn off. Their beat-down produced a fear in the populous:

Acts 19:17 This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified.

The exorcists had invoked **the name of the Lord Jesus** to no avail. His name was **magnified** means people understood that the Jesus whom Paul preached was not a power, He was a Person. **You couldn't use His name unless you knew Him personally.** His name was not a formula by which you could control supernatural forces.

You see, a basic tenet of the occult (as I understand it) is that you can discover the formulas or techniques by which to control powerful supernatural forces. The intent of these episodes in Ephesus was to show that the truly powerful man or woman is the one controlled by God.

This second episode broke the back of occult superstition in Ephesus:

Acts 19:18 And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds.

Note the phrase, **many who had believed.** They were Christians but had continued in certain **deeds.** What kind of **deeds?** It could refer to sin in general but more likely points to what is described in the next verse.

Acts 19:19 Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned *them* in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and *it* totaled fifty thousand *pieces* of silver.

Magic is a catch-all term that includes rituals and incantations and all sorts of occult activity. After getting saved they kept their interest in

the occult. They held on to their books. Up to this point they saw no pressing need to sever their ties with the occult.

Sometimes a new believer hangs on to old habits that are inconsistent with biblical values. Other times a new believer gets rid of those habits, including material objects related to them – only to reintroduce those things later. *Be careful!*

Fifty thousand pieces of silver was a lot of money. You could purchase about seventeen hundred slaves for that much money. Notice, too, they didn't sell the books. They were inherently evil; why allow others to be influenced by them?

Acts 19:20 So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

Prevailed is a word that indicates a contest or struggle. The **word of the Lord** had soundly defeated the occult at Ephesus after a struggle against it. God had set-up these unusual events as a contest in order to show the Ephesians the folly of their superstitions.

Spiritual power comes from submitting yourself to the indwelling presence of God.

The exorcists had failed because they did not know Jesus Christ. They did not have the Holy Spirit dwelling within them. Demons would not submit to them because they were not men submitted to God.

Paul could deliver folks from demons. He was a man in whom the Holy Spirit dwelt. He was a man submitted to God.

There is no outside source, no magic formula for prayer or practice. Again the contemporary church must take heed. There are an awful lot of groups claiming they have uncovered or discovered some 'secret' to healing or to delivering from demons.

There's no secret to it at all! **Any** believer submitted to God can be used of God at His discretion.

We care for others. We care about their suffering. We want to do something about it. We want to heal them or see them healed; we want to deliver them or see them delivered.

But we must proceed within the limits set by the limitless power of the Word of God. And we must be submitted to the direction and decisions of the indwelling Spirit of God.

