

## **The Witness of a Panicked Pagan**

*"Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands." (Acts 19:26)*

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God for salvation, as Paul reminds us (Romans 1:16). All who believe the Gospel enter into a new realm of existence; they are translated into the Kingdom, under the glorious and gracious rule of God's own Son (Colossians 1:13). They receive the Spirit of God to dwell in them, and be with them; He immediately begins to work in them to bring salvation to full flower, with blossoms of righteousness (Ezekiel 36:26,27), Christ-like virtue (Galatians 5:22,23; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18), supernatural endowments for serving others (1 Corinthians 12:7-11), and power to bear witness to Christ and His Kingdom (Acts 1:8).

All those thus endowed become part of a new company, a new movement and community that is being erected into a glorious dwelling-place for God on the foundation of Scripture and according to the direction marked out by the life of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:20-22). God is their Father (Galatians 4:6); Christ is their Lord (Acts 2:34-40); the Spirit of God is their Companion and Comforter (John 14:15-17); the Church is their new family, in which all distinctions and differences dissolve into glorious unity in Jesus Christ (Colossians 3:11; John 17:21); and their neighbors, whatever their need, are the objects of their mission and their love (Matthew 22:34-40; Matthew 28:18-20). For the believer in Jesus Christ, nothing remains the same; everything is being made new (2 Corinthians 5:17; Revelation 21:5). His world turned upside-down in Christ, the believer sets about to introduce that glorious transformation to everyone around him (Acts 17:6,7), for he knows that only in Christ can anyone be truly free from the ravages of sin and unbelief.

The Gospel of Christ is the power of salvation, bringing transformation to people and their cultures and societies. As every area of life--every relationship, role, institution, and artifact of culture, even the creation itself--has been made subject to the wrenching and debilitating power of sin (Romans 8:20,21), so every area of life is susceptible to the transforming power of the Gospel. The course of church history has witnessed this over and over again, as men and women, gloriously transformed through faith in Christ, have set their hands to the work of proclaiming and embodying the Kingdom of God, transforming cultures and societies in line with the new realities of beauty, goodness, and truth which the grace of Christ is restoring to the world.

For the Christian, this transforming power of the Gospel is a glorious and exciting prospect. For the unbeliever, seeing this occur around him, it can be downright scary, as Demetrius the silversmith of Ephesus shows us in his panic-filled report.

## **A Careful Observer**

One gets the impression that Demetrius had been following developments in Ephesus for some time. It had been over two years since the itinerate preacher Paul had arrived and begun preaching and teaching, first in the local synagogue, then in a rented hall. Demetrius' employment put him right smack in the middle of religious life in Ephesus.

His guild made the idols and assorted other devotional items associated with the worship of Artemis, the goddess of the Ephesians.

Doubtless many times Demetrius would have been asked his opinion of this Paul and his strange teachings about a man raised from dead, now established as Lord and Savior, who is calling all the world to submit to Him for forgiveness and new life. Perhaps he slipped quietly into the back of the hall on occasion to hear Paul as he held forth for this new faith. His craft undoubtedly brought him into contact with people from throughout the military district of Asia, a relatively small corner in the southwest of what is now Turkey. He would have heard from various cities of that district--Smyrna, Thyatira, Philadelphia, Sardis, and others--that the message Paul was proclaiming had begun to put down roots in these areas as well. It must have seemed to Demetrius that "all the residents of Asia [had] heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10).

How could this be? The worship of Artemis had prevailed in Ephesus time out of mind; now, suddenly, everyone was turning to this Jesus whom Paul was proclaiming. Ephesus had seen religions of various kinds come and go, especially the "mystery sects" which seemed to pander to baser human instincts. But none of these had threatened the worship of Artemis--or the work of the silversmiths who supplied the demand for Artemis-related images and trinkets. Demetrius began to fear that not only would the sacred Artemis be dethroned, but his own livelihood might be jeopardized if this mad rush to the faith of Paul were to continue unchecked. So, calling his colleagues together, Demetrius reported his observations and spelled out his concerns. This "gospel" that Paul was preaching was throwing everyone and everything into a tumult and upheaval. The ground was shifting under Demetrius' feet, and, panicked, he rallied his associates in a desperate attempt to preserve the status quo.

### **Keys to the Gospel's Impact**

In Demetrius' brief exhortation to the silversmiths and other craftsmen we can discern four keys to the Gospel's power to transform people and cultures. Paul would later write to a young pastor in that very town and insist that his life was to be a pattern for all to follow in serving Christ and the Gospel (1 Timothy 1:16). It may be that what Demetrius observed can be instructive for us in thinking about how the Gospel of Christ can exert transforming power in our day as well.

*Broadly proclaimed.* First, for the Gospel to exert transforming power it must be broadly proclaimed. In Acts 20 Paul reminded the elders of the Ephesian church that, when he was among them during the days of Demetrius' concern, he preached and taught publicly--in synagogues, public halls, probably in the marketplace as well--and house-to-house (Acts 20:20). Paul made use of every available venue as a platform for talking about Jesus and the Kingdom of God. Further, he made sure that the Word of the Lord went out from Ephesus to all the surrounding communities, and we can imagine that in these, too, public and private teaching was conducted by those taught by Paul.

If we would see the Gospel have the kind of world-transforming impact it had in Paul's day, we're going to have to break out of the confines of our churches and look for ways to establish platforms for the Gospel in neighborhoods, coffee shops, bookstores, even classrooms and office conference rooms. There we need to engage in conversations, share testimonies, seek out discussions, offer to teach, and entertain the questions of any and all, just as Paul did wherever he went. The Gospel is like light, leaven, and salt. It needs to go everywhere, penetrate everything, makes its presence known everywhere in order to do the transforming work it is truly capable of doing.

*Precisely targeted.* The thing that really got Demetrius' attention was when he heard Paul say that gods made with hands are not gods at all. Paul did not preach the Gospel in the abstract. Wherever he went he proclaimed the truth of God into the culture of his surroundings, exposing the lies and half-truths of unbelief and insisting that the Gospel alone can meet the needs and satisfy the concerns of all men. Our panicked pagan understood clearly the implications of Paul's preaching: If he's right, or, at least, if he's *believed*, then we're out of a job!

If we want the Gospel to have transforming power today we need to speak it directly to the issues and concerns of the people in our communities. We need to tell them that everything they're trusting in apart from God will fail them; only Jesus can give them real hope and a full and abundant life. Not their wealth, their work, or their well-being will endure; Jesus alone is the eternal, unchanging God and Savior.

*Pointing out a better way.* Demetrius complained (as the Greek has it) that Paul was "misleading" people away from the worship of Artemis. That assumes that he was leading them somewhere else, somewhere more appealing to them, somewhere that, evidently, Paul had described in such highly desirable terms that people felt free to leave their ancestral goddess and launch out in an entirely new spiritual direction.

We need to hold out the glory of God's salvation to people, in all its polychromatic grandeur. The Gospel is not just about being forgiven and feeling peaceful and hopeful about heaven. It's about that, to be sure, but there is more. The Gospel of the Kingdom is about a glorious rule of righteousness, peace, and joy that is advancing over all the earth, the Light of God driving the darkness of ignorance, despair, and destitution back over the horizon, as it increases over all the earth (Isaiah 9:7; Daniel 2:44,45; 1 John 2:8). All things are being made new, and joy and rejoicing are the order of the new order, as men and women enter into the grace and truth of God, where they discover fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11).

*The power of persuasion.* Finally, Demetrius was especially concerned because he realized Paul had managed to accomplish this by the power of persuasion. He could not have understood about the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to new life. But he understood there were no gimmicks, trickery, theatricality, or other tomfoolery deceiving all those who were coming to Christ. They were being persuaded to believe, pure and simple, and, thus, persuaded not to believe in Artemis any longer.

We need to learn the art of persuasion better. Persuasion involves conversation, listening with understanding, developing relationships of mutual enjoyment and trust, and earning

the right to ask hard questions and discuss personal views and concerns. Paul didn't just preach, and neither should we. He shared testimonies with people. He asked questions and was questioned. He dialogued and discussed matters at length. He urged people to consider their own worldview and just how coherent and reasonable it was in the light of the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what we need to do as well.

The concerned pagans of our day have been given a bit of a respite lately, what with the heroic efforts of Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens assuring them there's nothing to worry about and nothing to fear from these purveyors of religion. But, as Michael Novak argued so eloquently recently in *First Things*, these screeds are the cries of desperate men. The Demetriuses of our day are gathering the troops together to warn about the spread of the Gospel into all of life. Rather than be cowed by their bravado, let us turn up the heat and devote ourselves to advancing the Good News of Jesus broadly, precisely, with a clear and compelling vision, and by all the powers of persuasion available to us.

### **For Reflection**

Whom are you seeking to persuade concerning the Gospel? How can the people around you see that there really is transforming power in this Good News?

*T. M. Moore is dean of the Centurions Program of the Wilberforce Forum and principal of [The Fellowship of Ailbe](#), a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. He is the author or editor of 20 books, and has contributed chapters to four others. His essays, reviews, articles, papers, and poetry have appeared in dozens of national and international journals, and on a wide range of websites. His most recent books are *The Ailbe Psalter* and *The Ground for Christian Ethics (Waxed Tablet)*, and [Culture Matters \(Brazos\)](#). He and his wife and editor, Susie, make their home in Concord, Tenn.*