

GOD’S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH THE CHURCH AND THROUGH THE STATE

Acts 19:23-41

INTRODUCTION

On September 28, 2008, about one month before the last Presidential election, the pastors in 30 churches in the US endorsed, by name, a candidate for President. They did this as a protest against an IRS policy which states that non-profit corporations, which are what churches legally are, cannot make political endorsements. These churches wanted to intentionally challenge that rule as they viewed it as an infringement upon their free speech rights.

Pastor Rick Warren, the founding and lead pastor of Saddleback Community Church in California and author of “The Purpose Driven Church” and the New York Times best-seller, “The Purpose Driven Life” launched the PEACE coalition in 2006. This is a coalition of thousands of churches and parachurch organizations whose goal it is to “mobilize one billion Christians in local churches around the world to copy Jesus' model of ministry. ‘For followers of Jesus, one of the most important words in our vocabulary is the word “Go!”’ Warren said. ‘Jesus repeatedly commanded every believer to go; you can't spell gospel or good news without 'go' - ours is an active, not passive, faith.’ P.E.A.C.E. is an acronym for Promote reconciliation; Equip servant leaders; Assist the poor; Care for the sick; and Educate the next generation. Coalition members see these actions as Jesus' antidote to five "global giants" - problems that affect billions of people worldwide: spiritual emptiness, self-centered leadership, poverty, pandemic disease and illiteracy.”

Dr. Michael Horton in an article he wrote for “Modern Reformation” magazine entitled, “Church or Political Action Committee?” asks some questions as he reflects upon these sorts of actions by churches and church leaders. He asks, “Has God in fact called the church to reform society and to solve the world’s global crises? What authorization do pastors or churches have to endorse candidates and pronounce on public policies?” Churches, especially wealthy churches in the US are doing all sorts of things. The question is: what should a church do? Does God give us any instructions on what a church is and what a church does? This morning as we look at what God did in and through the church at Ephesus under the leadership of the apostle Paul during the three year period he was there we are going to consider that question and a second one directly related to it: When the church does what it is supposed to do, what sorts of things are going to happen?

We actually answered the first question last week as we looked at vv. 8-22. The church in Ephesus was formed by and around the proclamation of the good news concerning the kingdom of God by a mighty work of the Holy Spirit. We saw that Paul daily reasoned in a public lecture hall concerning the kingdom of God (vv.8-10). What was it that he was saying every day for at least 730 days? We know what he was saying because we have examples of his teaching in the book of Acts and we have 13 letters that he wrote to the churches and to leaders in the churches.

Paul explained who God was, the creator and King of the universe who was sustaining the whole universe moment by moment by his powerful word. He explained the triune nature of this one God. He talked about God’s creation of man in his own image, male and female in perfect righteousness. He described the glory of humanity as God’s image bearers and vice regents who were made to rejoice in him and glorify him while caring for and ruling over his creation. He described God’s agreement that he made with Adam that if he would obey him by not eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he and all of his descendants would live with God forever in his perfect kingdom. However, God also told Adam that if he did not obey him, both he and all of his descendants would die, would become slaves to sin and death and the devil.

So Paul described how Adam and then every human after him rebelled against this great and gracious king and thus brought upon themselves and all creation the principle of death. He described how we entered into a state

of open warfare with the God who made us, living in his world, using his many gifts to fight against him and his gracious rule. He described the wickedness and horror of living as God's enemies. He showed how God has justly expressed his wrath against the sins of human beings through the years and how he has promised one day to finally punish all of his enemies forever in hell.

Yet Paul also described how this offended king has not dealt with humans as we deserve. Rather than killing every human and sending them immediately into eternal torment he has graciously provided us with food and clothing and shelter and good government and families and all the pleasures of this world, contrary to what we deserve. But chiefly Paul described how this God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit planned before creating the universe to save out of this wicked and fallen race of humanity a people for himself. He planned to restore his kingdom on this earth and to fill it with a holy people. The means by which he planned to do this was in the sending of the eternal Son of God to take on human flesh and to live in perfect obedience to the law of God, doing what no human has ever done, perfectly loving God and people in all the details of a real human life. Then this Son of God suffered and died on a Roman cross, bearing in his own body the wrath of God against all the sins of all those who would trust in him. He showed how the resurrection validated the person and work of Jesus as the one through whom God would reconcile his people to himself and set up his kingdom on earth.

He then went on to explain how God the Holy Spirit has now come into the world to glorify the person and work of Jesus through the preaching of this good news. He showed how God's kingdom was present in the work of the Spirit as he calls and regenerates and seals and rules over and baptizes the people of God in one church. He explained how all who are born of the Spirit trust in and love this Jesus and now live as members of God's kingdom on this earth. Thus each local church is an outpost of the kingdom of heaven. He told the people that believers are citizens of heaven. We conduct ourselves now in this world as if we are members of another kingdom, citizens of another city. One day our king will return from heaven and will destroy the kingdoms of this world and we will live with him forever in God's restored kingdom. Until that time we now live as aliens and strangers, as refugees on this planet.

In brief these are the sorts of things that Paul spent his time explaining to the church gathered daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. So in answer to "what is the church supposed to be doing?" our answer, based upon this story and the rest of the NT is this: we are to teach the gospel to all who will listen. We are to regularly gather together to hear God speak to us the message of his kingdom by the word and the sacraments and to respond to that word in worship. We are heralds, ambassadors of the great king and our duty is to learn and then deliver his message. It is not the job of the church to fix the problems of this passing world. It is our job to proclaim, to herald forth the good news of the kingdom of God and then live as good citizens of that kingdom while living in the kingdoms of this world.

So what happens when a church does this? Some of the results we saw last week. We saw that as a result of Paul's teaching daily in the city of Ephesus all the inhabitants of the region of the Roman province of Asia heard the gospel by Christians talking about Christ as they went about their daily lives and by intentional church planting in other cities in Asia. We saw how the name of Jesus was feared and admired as a result of God's extraordinary miracle working through Paul. We saw how those who believed the gospel publicly turned away from their sinful practices, no matter what it cost them. This week we are going to see further results of what happens when the church is faithful to do what God has called the church to do.

MAIN POINT

When God causes the gospel to spread rapidly in a region through a local church...

I. Some approved, sinful practices in the surrounding culture are challenged (vv.19-20, 26 & 37)

Verse 23 introduces us to what happens next. While Paul daily continued to teach the gospel while preparing for his journey to the churches in Macedonia, Achaia, Jerusalem and then on to Rome there arose "no little disturbance concerning the way" of salvation through Christ which Paul was teaching. The disturbance was

instigated by one man, a guy by the name of Demetrius. He was a manufacturer of silver models of the massive temple to the Greek goddess, Artemis who was called in the Roman religious system, Diana. His complaint against Paul and the church was that as a result of Paul's teaching that "gods made with hands are not gods" (v. 26) large numbers of people in Ephesus and throughout Asia had stopped worshipping Artemis and thus stopped buying the silver shrines that Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen made.

We know the sorts of things that Paul was saying about idolatry because we have examples of his teaching in many places. In his sermon before the Areopagus in Athens Greece, after explaining that God was intimately involved in every aspect of the Athenians lives and that they were made in his image so that they would seek God as the treasure of their lives, he says to those idol-worshipping people: (Acts 17:29-31) "Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." In 1 Corinthians 10 he commands the church: "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry... What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons." So Paul, in preaching the good news about Christ to idol worshippers included clear statements regarding the wickedness of idol worship.

What Paul did not do was organize the church to go out and protest against idol worship. They didn't make signs and stand outside the temple of Artemis and yell at those who entered, "You wicked people, you are worshipping demons." He didn't send Christians out at night to tear down idols and temples to false gods. He didn't try to lobby the local officials or the Roman emperor to pass a law making idol worship illegal. Also, he didn't tell those who worshipped idols that they could ask Jesus into their hearts and then go on worshipping their idols as idol worshipping Jesus followers. What Paul did was declare that there was a full amnesty for idol-worshipping traitors of the one God through faith in the obedient, crucified and resurrected Son of God. He announced that all who trusted Christ were born again of the Holy Spirit and thus were God's workmanship "created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do." He told them that one of those good works was to not participate in idol worship any longer but to only worship God the Father through Jesus the Son by God the Holy Spirit in the company of the true church.

What happened? As more and more people became Christians and thus more and more idol worshippers stopped worshipping idols and thus stopped purchasing the silver shrines and other artifacts associated with idolatry the craftsmen who made the artifacts lost income. Fewer people showed up at the shrines. Idol worship was on the way out because the church preached the good news about the kingdom of God. You can visit the remains of the temple of Artemis today in Ephesus. No one still worships the goddess of hunting, fertility and death but Jesus is worshipped all over the world. How did this happen? Simply by the faithful preaching of the gospel daily by Paul in the lecture hall of Tyrannus which led to people all over Asia turning "to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come"—which is how Paul describes what happened in Thessalonica, another idol-worshipping community.

I wonder what might happen in Janesville if we and all the other churches in town committed ourselves to this one thing, teaching the gospel, learning the gospel and living in accord with the gospel of the kingdom of God? What might happen with the drug trafficking business or to sexual promiscuity and the incidence of illegitimate children and STD's and the porno industry or to people ruining their lives through gambling at the casinos or among the huge number of bars, liquor stores and AA meetings in Janesville or to the Janesville mall as people stop shopping for and buying all manner of unnecessary consumer goods? What approved of, sinful practices in the surrounding culture might be challenged if we, the churches simply concentrated on this announcement that God has done everything for us to live as members of his kingdom and that we do nothing but believe he has done everything?

II. Some people in the surrounding culture will be offended (vv.23-34)

Demetrius calls a meeting of all those craftsmen who are involved in the manufacture of his model shrines and the other artifacts associated with the idolatry of Ephesus and Asia. There are three things that he is mad about and three things that he uses to motivate all these other people to join him in seeking to stop Paul and the church. First and most he is angry that he and his fellow artisans are losing income due to decreased demand for his shrines and other objects of worship. Second he and they are angry that their whole way of life is being threatened. They are accusing Paul and the church of trying to change the entire fabric of Ephesian culture which revolves around the worship of various idols. Third and the item that is most on the surface, they are furious because they are convinced that the church is out to destroy the worship of Artemis who is the main object of worship in Asia. Her temple has put Ephesus on the map. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and the city of Ephesus had a world wide reputation as the guardians of her temple. There was a steady stream of pilgrims coming to their city to visit Artemis' temple and thus their fame and fortune are under attack by the church, at least that is what they claim.

This small gathering of men, enraged by these threats against them and their way of life storm through the streets of Ephesus chanting "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians" and gathering up all those whom they met as they made their way to the theater. While the angry mob gathers momentum on the way to the meeting place Demetrius sends some of his fellow workers to find Paul. They do not locate him but they seize two of Paul's fellow travelers from Macedonia, Gaius and Aristarchus. They drag them along and bring them to the theater where the mob is gathering. Notice, when the angry mob gets to the theater all is in chaos. Verse 32, "some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together." Without Paul there was no way for Demetrius to focus the energy of the mob and so chaos reigns. What he wanted to do was to be able to say to the assembly: here is the man who is out to destroy the worship of Artemis but instead he has two unrecognizable fellow travelers of Paul.

Paul, knowing that he is the focus of the accusations wants to go into the theater to make a defense and most likely, to save his two friends. However, the other Christians won't let him go into the assembly. They know that he will certainly be killed if he does. In addition to the church halting him from doing such a foolish thing several of the leading men of the city, elected officials who were friends of Paul's also send word to him that he should in no way enter into that seething cauldron of hatred. Now a strange thing happens. The Jewish people who are also present put one of their own forward to make a defense. While we are not told what he was planning on saying, it doesn't take much imagination to figure it out. Remember, Paul had been forced to leave the Jewish synagogue a couple of years earlier because most of the Jews were hardened against the gospel, refusing to believe it and even speaking evil of it. They know that these pagan Greeks do not understand that Paul, who is Jewish and who is regularly teaching from the OT Scriptures is not one of them. They want to make clear that they, the Jews have not been a part of diminishing the reputation of Artemis. They want to make it clear that they don't like Paul anymore than the idol worshippers in town. However, confirming their fears, as soon as Alexander stands up to speak the mass of people recognize that he is Jewish and thus does not worship Artemis and also opposes idol worship. This serves to focus the energy of the mob and they shout for two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians."

There is no way for a church that preaches and lives out the gospel of Christ to avoid the hostility of the surrounding culture. At some point the exclusive claims of Christ and the different lifestyle and values of his kingdom are going to come into conflict with the truth claims and lifestyles and values of this fallen world. However, I think it is crucial for us to recognize that the anger we arouse in the world should not be because we are trying to pass particular legislation or elect certain officials or because we, as the church, make pronouncements that God prefers certain kinds of public policies over others. It is a travesty of the highest order that many non-believing people in the US are angry with the church not because of the gospel or because of gospel living but because the church has sought to bring in the kingdom of God by the methods of the world. By our own foolish pronouncements on public policy issues we have become simply another special interest group on the political scene. If people are going to be mad at us we want them to be mad because of the gospel

and the impact of that gospel on the world, not because we are promoting a particular vision of how America ought to be governed. It is not our job to reform or preserve the USA. It is our job to bear witness by word and life to our great king, the Lord Jesus Christ.

III. Sometimes God restrains the gospel's enemies through his established authorities (vv.34-41)

This mob scene in Ephesus is a familiar scene in the book of Acts. These sorts of mob actions against the church have been witnessed in Jerusalem, ending in the martyrdom of Stephen and in places like Lystra where Paul was stoned and left for dead. We have witnessed Jewish and Roman authorities killing and harming Christians in Jerusalem and Philippi. When we read about this mob in v. 34 we expect someone to die or at least be beaten. However, that is not what happens. What happens is that the elected city manager, the clerk of Ephesus stands up after two hours of chanting and gets the crowd to quiet down and then he proceeds to dismantle the anger and prevents any harm from coming to Paul or any other Christian. He presents a logical argument to the crowd which pacifies them and sends them home without any further disturbance.

Look at his argument with them. He first affirms the fact of their city's preeminence as the guardian of Artemis' temple. He declares that there is no danger of that glory being diminished in the world as the whole world knows of Artemis and the divinely sent meteorite that is in her temple. He accuses them of acting in a rash manner when there is no cause for such actions as the two men they have seized have not desecrated the temple or verbally insulted Artemis. He then reminds them that there is a legal system in Ephesus, administered by the Roman proconsul before whom Demetrius and his cohort can bring their grievances if they have any. If they do not want to file a legal suit against the Christians but it is a matter of city policy then there are regularly scheduled meetings of the city council where these matters can be legally addressed and dealt with. Finally, he tells them that by engaging in this mob action they are in danger of bringing the Roman army down upon them as promoters of rebellion against Roman rule. This is not an idle warning as the Romans were very energetic at putting down any sort of organized disturbances and hanging all the leaders of such riots as this one on their cruel crosses. With that final warning he dismisses the crowd and everyone goes home.

This man is not a Christian and he is not motivated by any love for Christians. Rather, he is exercising his God-given authority to do what God has called him to do. He doesn't know that he is serving God but according to what Paul says in Romans 13:1-7 that is exactly what he is doing. Listen to some of what Paul says there: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." So here in Ephesus God protects his church and moves his program for saving all of his people out of all the nations of the world forward through his servant, the town clerk of Ephesus.

God exercises his power, his authority both through the church and through the state. However, the ways in which he exercises his authority is different in each case. In the church he exercises his power to save his people in the clear teaching of his word, the proper exercise of baptism and communion and the careful shepherding of his people by the pastors and elders of the church. However, he exercises his power to restrain evil and promote good in the world through the coercive power of the state. The state rewards those who do good and punishes those who do evil and the authorities do this as God's servants. The government is not the enemy of the church but neither does it exist to promote the church's agenda. It exists to maintain peace and justice in a fallen world so that the church is free to "live peaceful and quiet lives, godly and dignified in every way" as Paul says in 1st Timothy.

The government, when working as God intends, maintains a just society so that all citizens, both Christian and non-Christian can pursue their lawful vocations according to their own conscience. It is an error for the church

to try to use the power of the state to do its work and it is an error for the state to seek to exercise its power to establish or threaten the church. There is far more that needs to be said about this important subject but for now we are to see that God is at work in and through the state for his good purposes and the state often provides the environment in which we are able to do our work of proclaiming and living the gospel.

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