

Clarity & Confusion in Ephesus

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[0 : 00] If you are out this morning, you'll remember that one of the focus points towards the end of the sermon was the fact that Christians are called to pick up their cross, to carry their cross and to walk.

In other words, Christians live with a sense of responsibility. Christians aren't asked to just believe in something and leave it at that, but that it becomes part of our lifestyle, a sense of contributing to the Kingdom work and whatever that entail for us. And it's different for all of us. We have different gifts, we have different situations.

Now, the Book of Acts is really all about this, isn't it? It's all about people who, and specifically people like Paul, who are given a very specific, deliberate, public, pioneering message to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ, something new to most of the people in these areas, and to preach it and to teach it, to encourage the new Christians and to build them up.

And particularly in this chapter, this chapter 19 is really about the impact of the Gospel message on a really, a really kind of mega diverse, religiously, a really religiously diverse city.

As we noticed already, they've got a big temple to the goddess Artemis. This was apparently one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. So pretty important, pretty kind of culturally significant, religiously significant, a big deal. This place is quite self-important in many ways.

[1 : 35] Religiously important, loads of different religions, loads of different ways of worshiping, lots of different gods. And the Gospel comes into this context. Despite the fact that we're reading about a city from a long time ago, in many ways it resembles our situation today. It's quite like Edinburgh.

In the sense that there's a lot of confusion about who Jesus is. We see that in the first examples we're going to look at. People don't fully understand who Jesus is and the impact he could have on their lives. Now isn't that true? Sometimes of us even.

Isn't that true of your friends? Don't really, maybe really even have a clue who Jesus is. Have some vague idea about Christmas? Not much more than that. So this is really relevant to us.

I've titled this sermon, Clarity and Confusion in Ephesus. And the first bit I want to look at shows two sets of people who needed clarity in their lives.

The kind of religious people, people who had a degree of understanding about Jesus, but it was kind of messed up and it really needed clarifying in their lives in order for them to know Jesus fully and personally.

[2 : 52] So let's look at these first two groups. You'll find these in verses 1-7 and then again from verses 13-20. Paul comes into Ephesus and first of all he meets this group of twelve men and they're just called disciples.

And he asks them some questions. And as he asks them these questions we find out a bit about their understanding of Jesus. There's a bit of debate about these people. There's a bit of debate about exactly how much they understood about Jesus.

Some people will say they're just kind of followers of John because they say, you'll notice in the passage, that they've been baptised, that they've had the baptism of John. So they have a baptism of repentance. Paul reminds them that's what the baptism of John was.

And some folk will hear commentators say that, you know, that that was the limit of their understanding. And some people say, well, they're Christians but in a kind of messianic sense they have an Old Testament understanding of the Messiah to come.

They know about Jesus but there's a crucial thing in this passage, isn't there, that Paul picks out. He seems to, obviously we have a selective narrative of what happened but he picks out by his questions the fact that they don't have the Holy Spirit.

[4 : 05] It's quite a major part of their religious, spiritual, Christian lives. And Paul doesn't want to leave it there, does he? He doesn't say, oh well, he, as it were, does something about it.

They are baptised in the name of Jesus and they receive the Holy Spirit in a really dramatic way. In a sense, they receive these twelve men, they receive their own personal Pentecost.

Now this isn't, this doesn't happen every time we come across somebody being converted. And it's not an example of a kind of second blessing type of Christianity.

Where they have an extra experience where they receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit in a sort of over the top way. But it is an example of the importance of understanding for these people that simply they didn't have a full understanding of Jesus.

They needed clarity. They needed, maybe in a very short space of time. We don't know how long this conversation went on for. It was quite focused, wasn't it? But they needed discipling. They needed bringing on in their understanding of who Jesus is.

[5 : 15] Because it made a really significant impact on their lives. If you think about it, Christians are people who understand a bit about Jesus and who believe in him, who understand that he's a Saviour, who haven't been filled with the Holy Spirit, well that's not what God wants for us.

Because we're told that every believer is filled with the Holy Spirit. Now this is a reality for us as well. For every single Christian who believes and who is baptized and who knows Jesus as Saviour are also filled with the Spirit.

And we mustn't forget that. Maybe we have a tendency to play down the work of the Spirit in our particular culture. But they were to know particular gifts at that particular time, as evidence to them perhaps, as a real demonstration of this power that they just didn't know was there.

They didn't realise it. They hadn't tapped into it. And so, as we see particularly in verse 2b, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.

They had no idea. And so Paul, at that particular moment, his ministry, was to clarify for them, to enlighten them and to bring more understanding for them.

[6 : 35] There's a second group of people, and you'll find them a wee bit further down in the first half of this chapter. These are our Jews. They seem to have been under the particular leadership of one of the temple members.

And I'm going to call them kind of the sort of professional exorcists. They seem to have this job where they would go around in their particular ministry in a time when there would have been much more awareness of, and much more reality of, evil spirits, spirit possession.

Their job, maybe their self-appointed job, was to perform exorcisms. You probably don't know anybody who does that. So again, this is one of the very distinctive things about this chapter, very different times in many ways.

There's an interesting thing about what they did. They claimed, they tried to claim the authority of Jesus as they did this.

You remember that one of the distinctives about this place was that they were, it was religiously diverse. Now there was also, there would have been a group of people whose job was this to go around and to cast out evil spirits.

[7 : 52] And the way they did it was to have a kind of list of deities. Let's say there were 150, 300, whatever it was, deities that they knew about.

And the way they would operate was that they would reel off a list of names of all these different deities, because perhaps one of them might be effective. They might just get lucky, as it were.

And as we see later on, at the end of this section, following their conversion, they sell some of the scrolls and the things that they used. It was, again, quite a lucrative business for them.

Now obviously what these folk were doing was that they just had, they'd heard of Jesus and they used his name. They took his name and they used it for their own personal situation.

Did they honour Jesus' name? No. We get no sense here that what they were doing was bringing honour to God at all. They lived and worked in the shadow of the temple.

[8 : 55] All they were about was infused with this kind of pagan, multi-deity, multi-God environment.

And their behaviour was really lumping the name of Jesus in. They took Jesus' name and they kind of lumped it in with all these other big, long lists of ones that they had. And they said, let's try Jesus' name as well. See if it works.

So they didn't reverence the name of Jesus. But God's spirit, was it work? Now this isn't necessarily in this section. We don't see that Paul comes in and says a big sermon to these people.

But God works in a very distinctive way here as well, doesn't he? Because an amazing thing happens. The spirit himself seems to rebuke them and say, I don't know who you are.

Almost like you have no right to use this name of Jesus. And they go through this horrendous experience where this spirit-possessed man beats them up. What an incredible story that is. What a terrifying story.

[9 : 59] And because of that, we see in this chapter, that news got out big time. Everybody seems to know about this because as we go back into this section, in verse 17, when this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear.

Maybe they didn't have taken this whole thing lightly. You imagine that there would have been a sense of fear about the whole evil spirit thing if these people had a job to do. But this was like a whole other level because they saw the effect that this had had.

These people were claiming the name of Jesus. They had no right to. And as it says, they were filled with fear, seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Now this is the work of the spirit. This is what acts is about.

The news, the real news of Jesus and who Jesus really is coming into a community to change things. Because the Gospel comes into a community and it changes the way people think.

It changes the way they understand themselves and who God is. Because God does not want those who He has as His people in this community to go on in ignorance, misusing His name as if it was any other name in this way.

[11 : 15] He wants them to understand that His name is powerful because He is the one true God. He's the one true God and He's the one true God. He wants them to worship.

And so it says, as we just finished off this wee section here, then this way the Word of the Lord spread widely and in power. Now regarding these two groups of people, what's interesting to note, what's important to note is how each changed as a result of the experience that they had.

As they were converted or brought more fully into a clarity of understanding of the Gospel, each changed. The Twelve had this remarkable evidence of the Holy Spirit working in their lives.

They were baptized into the name of Jesus and it says, back with me to verse 6, when Paul places hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Their lives were radically changed. And they were gifted, weren't they, for service. They spoke in tongues and they prophesied. They spoke out about, we've not told what they spoke out about, but we presume they spoke out about the Gospel message.

[12 : 35] Now also, the community from this kind of Jewish nucleus who were in that kind of scene of this spirit, the exorcism kind of scene, there was a big change in that community too.

If you go with me to verse 18, first stage is confession. Many of those who believe now came and openly confessed their evil deeds, big change in their lives.

A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to 50,000 drachmas.

In this way, the Word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. They give up probably a lot of, if not all, the financial clout that they had.

So they took a big hit in their finances because they realised the money they were getting was not coming from a good place. And so they change. Their behaviour changes.

[13 : 47] They repent and their behaviour changes. How they go about their lives. They take a big deal for this community because that was like their industry. So we get clarity and enlightenment about the Gospel from confusion in the first section here.

But I want to move on to the second section now, the second section that we read about the riots. Acts is a really dynamic book, isn't it? Loads of things happen. There's often a public outcry about various different things and the biggest ones here are real full-on dangerous riot, really angry people because of the message of the Gospel that's changing this city.

And the specific change here is because people start to get a hint of another potential financial meltdown.

And Paul's at the centre of it, as are some of his friends. Paul particularly is warned by his friends even not to go anywhere near it because they presumably fear for his safety.

Demetrius the Silversmith works it out. He thinks, wait a minute, if this Gospel message gets a hold here and folks stop worshipping Artemis, they're not going to want these wee statues that I peddle. [15:08] And he gets all his pals who also peddle these wee statues and says, guys, do you understand what's going to happen here? And they say, yeah, wait a minute. And they get angry.

They get really, really angry. And so Paul and the rest have a real situation here. Now you imagine, you know, we've had a few years now of anger about finance, about particularly bankers seem to bear the brunt.

And you'd put yourself in the position of being the one who everybody wants to get. You may even work for a bank here, but I'm pretty sure that you've probably not been in the middle of a riot and your name's not been called out by the people outside making a wee bonfire and holding placards. But if you think about somebody like Fred Goodwin, a major demonstration, he's the kind of people that people want to get, or they want at least him to come out and to apologise.

They want him to be stripped of his knighthood. They want him to be forced to sell his home and whatever. Move into a council flat probably. Paul is under extreme tension in this section then, because people are out to get him.

[16:21] This isn't abstract. This isn't him just holding the gospel message in theory, and maybe talking to a few of his pals. This is right in the middle of Princess Street, or St Andrew's Square, surrounded by angry tradespeople, financiers, and important people in the town.

Now what do we learn from this section? This is a section of mass confusion. If we've seen clarity in terms of gospel understanding, we have a mass scale riot, confusing mess.

It tells us later in the passage that the people kept shouting different things with what's called the theatre. They were just yelling, shouting. So there's a whole of the confusion going on.

But the really sad thing about this passage is that there is spiritual confusion that is deepened. The spiritual confusion seems to get worse, because the people at the heart of this, who stand up and make a big fuss because of the gospel, end up condemning the gospel even more.

And so spiritual darkness reigns, it would seem, in this section. What do we learn? If you turn it over to verse 27, I hope if I looked at the right chapter.

[17:45] There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who's worshipped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.

And he uses this argument to say that their trade will lose its good name. In other words, he says, we will be hit financially. Now note how much that contrasts with the previous section, where those whose lives were changed by the gospel were happy to sell what they'd been using to make the profit beforehand.

So their lives were changed. These guys won't let that happen. No way we are not letting go of this business. We are not letting go of our livelihood, and we are going to stick to this.

He's not willing to make the sacrifice, but there's also the fact that the people who went with him, who went with Demetrius, who he stirred up, at two specific points it tells us what they were shouting, what they were calling.

Look at verse 28. When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting, Is it Artemis of the Ephesians? We also see that in verse 34.

[18:57] When they realized he was a Jew, they shouted in unison for about two hours, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. So these people make a choice.

They make a deliberate choice, although the situation was incredibly heightened, wasn't it? They emotionally thought that they are going to reject Jesus, and they are going to call on the name of Artemis, the goddess of the temple up the hill, which gives them their livelihood.

That's the choice that they make to reject Jesus. It's the sad reality in this chapter. If we summarize this whole section, there's a real contrast, isn't there?

There's a real contrast in terms of the pace of what's going on, of the action, and there's a contrast in terms of the response that the people give to the gospel message.

They recognize a threat, they decide they're not going to let it change their lives, and in application for us, Paul leaves.

[20:10] So the preacher of the gospel leaves the city. Now think about that, those people who rejected the gospel message. The gospel message preacher leaves, and that's a really solemnizing thing for us.

If tonight we are not Christians, if you don't know where you're at spiritually, if you've maybe been hearing the gospel message a lot, or have heard it for a long time, and you choose to reject it, we leave that thought there, really, that the gospel message passes on from these people. It's important for us as Christians as well, isn't it? The vital importance of bringing the gospel message. And yet even in that situation, we recognize the up-and-down nature of this whole chapter.

If we take chapter 19 as a whole, and if you think about Paul's experience, and his friends, the people who were traveling with him, how up-and-down is their experience?

And from one place into Ephesus, they have really good gospel conversations with people who want to hear, and whose lives are subsequently changed.

[21 : 25] And they think, wow, this is amazing. And then they get into another situation where people whose spiritual lives were miles away, we hear stories, don't we, about how many places of witchcraft are on the royal mile.

And you think of these people and you think, well, there's no way they would end up in St. Columbus. Well, they were in Ephesus, radically changed. And the next situation we find is he's at the center of a riot with people screaming the name of a pagan deity, hating the gospel, hating that it would get anywhere near affecting their city life.

How do we take this chapter then and apply it? How do we look at what Paul did next and think about it for Paul and think about it for us?

There were, if we think about it, lots of different grey areas going on here. It wasn't straightforward. This wasn't like Gospel ministry by numbers, where they just went from town to town, or maybe in our context they would go from street to street or city to city, knocking on doors and it was all fine. Ups and downs, really, really, sometimes for us, if we're involved in Gospel ministry, really hard to deal with. I want to be a bit cheeky and steal two verses from the next chapter.

[22 : 48] I hope Derrick will forgive me next week, because it's really important to see how Paul responded to this. He's just been at the center of a riot, remember. Let's just read two verses in chapter 20, verse 1 and 2.

When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out from Macedonia. He travelled through that area speaking many words of encouragement to the people and finally arrived in Greece.

He encouraged people. Isn't that amazing? He'd just been at the center of a riot and his response is to move on to the next stage of his mission journey, having, first of all, called together the believers that were just possibly terrified by all the stuff that was going on, getting them together and saying a message of encouragement, building them up, keeping them strong, focusing them back on the Gospel message again.

And then, as he moves into another zone of ministry, into another area, he just shares encouragement along the way. Isn't that absolutely incredible? When we ask ourselves the question, how and why?

How did he do that? You know, if you've had a bad day at work and you've tried to witness to a work colleague and they've just ignored you, they've told you to forget about it, it's all ridiculous, you just feel, oh man, that was a waste of time, that was rubbish.

[24 : 12] I didn't get anywhere there. How am I supposed to, how am I going to bring that up again? That was awkward. Forget about it. We're tempted to think sometimes. I think the answer to the how and the why, what is it that is enabling Paul and what is it that will enable us in taking up our cross, in witnessing and carrying on the Gospel work, goes back into chapter 19, back into an encounter in the synagogue that we didn't really look at, but I want to look at one verse just now.

With this, we're just about done. Verse 8 in chapter 19. So Paul enters the synagogue as was his custom, although he, in the previous chapter, warned that it wasn't going to be for much longer if they kept rejecting the Gospel message.

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, really regular ministry, arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God. I think that's the central point for us, because it was the central point for Paul.

All that he was about was the Kingdom of God. And that's a life-changing thing, isn't it? If our understanding of who we are is affected by the fact that we're kingdom people, if you're a Christian, you're a kingdom person, a kingdom of God.

That means that God is coming again to bring in his new kingdom after he will have judged the world. It's the promise of God. It's something that Christians have to look forward to.

[25 : 48] It's the reality for us, which we believe in by faith. And it's something that was incredibly real for Perth, for Paul. I don't know where that came from.

And it's what enables him, can I just draw your attention to one of the verses that he says elsewhere? It's what enables him to say in Philippians 1, I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, but it's more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

He had a really distinct sense of what he was looking forward to by faith, because he knew it would be better than all the struggles of this life. But he knew that in the meantime, he had a job to do for the Christians, to build them up and to encourage them as he went along ministering, bearing massive weight on his shoulders as he did so.

So Paul has single-mindedness because of his understanding of the clarity he had about the kingdom of God. He had a real clear vision.

And I suppose the question that we ask ourselves as we just finished now, in all our different situations, in the different week that you have coming up, the different people that you've got to speak to, the people that you really want to witness to that you find it hard to, or even the resentment or the difficulty you might find in understanding that Jesus calls you to serve and to take up your cross and to walk.

[27 : 22] The question is, is our vision of the kingdom obscured? Do we let other things come in and distract us so that we don't see that our life is about the kingdom?

And our desires should be that others would know about the kingdom. That's what we need. We need to encourage each other, and this is why the city groups are so good for us at times, because we can encourage one another regularly in smaller groups.

We can pray together about the people that we know about the situations that we find ourselves in.

And our city group, for example, we had an interesting word come up.

We were finishing off Study One just this past Wednesday. And Study One had a lot of chat about being partners in the gospel.

We talked about partnership a lot. And it's really the sort of antithesis of the idea of ministry that somebody stands up the front and does all the ministry, and everybody else just comes to church and then goes home.

[28 : 31] The sense that we are working, Christians work together for the coming kingdom of God. And somebody, we were talking about that word partnership, and somebody suggested the word participant.

I thought that was a great word to use. And it's really helpful for us coming out of this chapter, seeing somebody who is absolutely, fully aware of the kingdom, which kind of fed him so that he was able to go out into the world with such a vital ministry.

That we are called to be participants in our own way, as we ask God to help us and lead us in what that means for us through prayer, and by encouraging one another.

We're participants. And one honour that is as we serve Jesus, 2,000 years or so after these words were written. So let's bow and pray about that just now.

Our Father in Heaven were amazed when we read this of the way that you worked to spread the message of Jesus Christ into a world that often rejected him, but sometimes gloriously accepted him.

[29 : 42] We thank you for the examples here of people whose lives were changed. Lord, we ask that you would really give us a vision of the kingdom, help us to see that we're people set apart, if we're Christians, we're called to be set apart, to be holy, and to look forward with hope and faith to the coming kingdom of God.

And we pray that that would, that you would by your spirit use that to encourage us to be people who serve, and who serve each other, and who encourage each other, so that we don't sit on the sidelines, as it were, and just let the world go by.

Help us to worship you, Lord. Forgive us when we don't. Forgive us when our eyes are misted over and our hearts grow cold. We pray this in the name of Jesus our Saviour. Amen.