

OFF WITCHCRAFT!

by Ray C. Stedman

When Paul came to Ephesus he found the city in the grip of superstition, fear, demonism, and darkness. It was a city devoted to sex and to religion -- in other words it was the San Francisco of the Roman empire. The great temple of Artemis was located there and was as familiar to the people of that day as the Golden Gate bridge is to us. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Tourists traveled from all over the Roman empire to see it, just as they come to San Francisco to see the bridges and cable cars.

In the nineteenth chapter of Acts, Luke gives us a fascinating account of how the gospel can reach and affect an entire city, and even its surrounding province, through a relatively small band of Christians. The church has forgotten for a long time that God never wins his battles by majority vote. He always uses a relatively small band of people who, working with a different approach than the world has available, are able in a fantastic way to affect whole cities, whole areas, whole nations by the effectiveness of their methods and the power that is available to them. This is what the church has forgotten and we need so desperately to rediscover it, as we are now doing in many ways.

The major problem in Ephesus was that it was a center for witchcraft. Superstition, demonism, and witchcraft held this city in its thrall. A weird mixture of black arts, worship of demons, astrology, occult practices of various kinds, and superstitious fears, had filled this city with priests, magicians, witches, warlocks, and quacks of every description. The inevitable consequence, as always among people who are held in bondage by witchcraft, was that people lived in fear and darkness, indulging their lusts in painful, degrading practices, and were sunken in slavery, in squalor, and in drunken debauchery.

To that city the apostle came and there he assaulted the strongholds of evil with the weapons of spiritual warfare. Remember that it was from this city that Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, and in one of those letters he said, "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal [not worldly, not the ordinary human plans and programs], but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds, casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ," {2 Cor 10:4-5 KJV}. And it was to Ephesus that Paul wrote from Rome, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood [people are not our problem], but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places," {Eph 6:12 KJV}. Those words underscore the viewpoint the apostle had of this great city of Ephesus -- that here was a stronghold of darkness which could only be overcome by the weapons of truth and love and righteousness and faith -- the weapons of our warfare.

There are many strongholds like this today. In this account we see what can happen when a church begins to catch on to the power that God has put at its disposal and operates in the way it was intended to operate.

Paul begins, as always, in the synagogue, as Luke tells us in Verse 8:

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God; but when some were stubborn and disbelieved, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

And God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. {Acts 19:8-12 RSV}

What a remarkable account! You notice that Paul began, as he always did, with the weapon of truth. He spoke

in the synagogue concerning the kingdom of God, i.e., God's rule over the hearts of men and his desire to bless them and fulfill them and to lead them into the place that he had originally intended man to be, a station of dominion and authority under the control and sovereignty of God. This kingdom of God, Paul said, had come with the coming of Jesus Christ, and it was opposed to the rule of Satan.

Wherever the gospel went it found men locked into the authority of the kingdom of Satan. The powers of darkness reigned in human affairs. That is why human history is the checkered account of man's struggles to be free from that from which he cannot free himself. It is this rule of darkness, this authority of the kingdom of Satan, which the kingdom of God in Christ challenges. This is what Paul was preaching in the synagogue.

At first it was welcomed. You remember that the Jews here had made Paul welcome, and had invited him to come back. He had returned as he promised and for three months, every Sabbath day, he reasoned with them out of the Scriptures about the kingdom of God. But when some of the Jews understood that to submit to the rule and authority, the Lordship, of Jesus meant to have to confess the emptiness of their religious respectability, they opposed Paul. When they realized that they could no longer pose as respectable because of their outward morality, but had to acknowledge that inwardly they were just as desperately dark and evil anyone else, they resisted him. Religious respectability is the toughest nut to crack in all the satanic kingdom of evil.

So these Jews made trouble for Paul, as they always did, and at last he decided to withdraw, taking the disciples with him. They moved out of the synagogue into rented quarters, the hall of Tyrannus. This unquestionably was one of the lecture rooms which the Greek teachers employed to teach philosophy and various other subjects of the arts and culture of the day. Paul rented it, according to some ancient authorities, from eleven o'clock in the morning till four in the afternoon. The Revised Standard Version has a marginal note which says, "Other ancient authorities add, 'from the fifth hour to the tenth,'" which, according to the Greek method of reckoning, was from eleven till four.

That was the time in Ephesus when all were taking a siesta. They closed up their shops, went home and had a leisurely meal, took a nap, worked around the garden, etc. The working day began at about seven in the morning. The shops closed at eleven and everyone went home until four when the shops reopened and business went on until about nine-thirty at night. This was their normal day. Evidently the Apostle Paul made tents during the morning hours to support himself. But at eleven o'clock he came to the hall of Tyrannus and lectured for five hours every day for two years.

Now, five hours a day, six days a week, fifty-two weeks a year for two years, adds up to 3,120 hours of lecturing. That equals 130 days of lecturing continuously for twenty-four hours a day. The content of those lectures was the great truths that we find in *The Epistles of Paul*. What a fantastic time of teaching! Wouldn't you like to have been in Ephesus, and had Paul teach you *The Epistle to the Romans*? And *The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians*? And all his other great books? Imagine the tremendous impact of this teaching! No wonder we read in Verse 10 that, "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." That was an entire province, an area larger than the state of California, filled with many cities.

Of course, it was not Paul who was teaching throughout this area. It was the Christians who heard him in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, and who, captivated and galvanized by these truths, began to spread the word throughout the whole area. They formed churches in other cities which evangelized in turn, so that in two years this whole province was reached by the gospel of Christ. Is not that amazing?

It was during this time that the church at Colossi was begun by Epaphras and Philemon, who carried the gospel up the Lycus valley into the cities there. Others, perhaps Trophimus and Tychicus, young men from this province, were involved in preaching to other cities of the region. They may have been the founders of the churches to which John later wrote his letters in the book of Revelation -- Smyrna and Sardis and Thyatira and Pergamum and Philadelphia and Laodicea, all of which are in this area and were begun by these Christians, largely unnamed and unknown, who heard the Apostle Paul proclaiming this fantastically revolutionary truth in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus. What power there is in the Word of God!

In addition, Luke tells us, the word was confirmed by signs:

And God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. {Acts 19:11-12 RSV}

Underline the word "extraordinary." These miracles were unusual. They were of a different kind than before. The quality which made them unusual was that they were performed by carrying away these cloths from the body of Paul, so that the miracles were accomplished at a distance from him.

Do not think that there is anything magic about this! There was no value inherent in the cloth. In fact, we can be misled greatly by the translation here. It was very difficult for the translators to put this in terms that would be meaningful to us in the western world, for these were not handkerchiefs or aprons in the usual sense. They were not little cloths that Paul used to blow his nose nor aprons like you ladies have in the kitchen. The handkerchiefs were literally sweatbands. The word means "sweat." They were bands of cloth which he bound around his head as he worked at making tents, to keep the sweat from running down into his eyes. They were, therefore, associated with the labor, the toil, that he went through to make the gospel available. The aprons were made of leather. He wore them while making tents, not while fixing his meals. It was these that were used for these miracles.

Again, this is not an attempt to support the practice of many faith healers of today who claim to do this kind of thing. They anoint cloths and mail them around the country. That is superstition, hocus pocus, a form of magic. This is not what Luke is talking about at all.

These are symbols which God chose to employ in order to underscore the characteristic of the apostle which made him a channel of the power of God -- just like Moses' rod. Cast on the ground it became a serpent, and another time when lifted over the waters, it poured them back. There was nothing magic about the rod itself; it was a symbol of something about Moses which God honored. So these sweatbands and trade aprons were symbols of the honest, dignified labor of the apostle, his labor of love and humbleness of heart, his servant-character which he manifested and which released the power of God. This is what God means to teach by this -- that it is through a man whose heart is so utterly committed that he is ready to invest hard, diligent labor in making the gospel available, and who is humble at heart, willing to stoop to a lowly trade, that the power of God is released.

The first sign of the crumbling of the stronghold of darkness in Ephesus was the attempt on the part of the powers of darkness to make an alliance with the Christian cause. As we have seen before this is often Satan's favorite trick. He tries to join the team:

Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, mastered all of them, and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks; and fear fell upon them all; and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. {Acts 19:13-17 RSV}

These seven sons of Sceva knew a good thing when they saw it. They were sons of a Jewish high priest, and they recognized that here was an opportunity to use religion, and the interest in religion, to advance their own cause. So they attempted to jump on the bandwagon and, employing these two names as though they were some kind of magic formula, they tried to cast out evil spirits by saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches."

This reveals something remarkable about people of this kind. We have many like them today, fortune tellers and swamis and yogis and gurus and mediums, who know enough about the occult to sound impressive but who are basically ignorant dupes, fooling around with powers they do not understand, and who do not know what will happen when people become involved with them. This is what these men were doing, attempting to use this as a way of making a good living, aggrandizing themselves.

But what happened is almost ludicrous. It is humorous. As they adjured the evil spirit by these names, the man in whom the evil spirit dwelt (notice Luke's careful distinction, as a physician, between the man and the evil spirit who possessed him), was under the control of that spirit. The spirit led him and empowered him to challenge these seven sons and to take them all on single-handed. You can imagine the scene. Can you not see them tumbling out the doors and windows with their clothes torn half off, bloody and wounded, as this man drove them out of the house?

The evil spirit was angered by this use of the name of Jesus, and it is interesting what he said in response to this adjuration. Our translation misses it a bit. There are two words which he used for "know." He said, "Jesus I know ..." (using a word that means, "I know him with a deep, instinctive, innate knowledge."), "and Paul I am acquainted with ...," (i.e., I know his name, I know who he is. I don't know him as well as I know Jesus, but I am acquainted with him.), "...but who are you?" That was the signal for his attack upon them and their ridiculous exodus out the doors and windows. This incident, no doubt because of the humor involved, became known all over Ephesus and both Jews and Greeks heard about it. It was impressive. And the result was that the name of Jesus was magnified. It took on impressive stature in the sight of these people of Ephesus because here was a name of power -- power in the realm of the invisible world.

This is also the first sign of a crack in the stronghold of darkness that held the city in thralldom, because, as Jesus said, "When Satan's kingdom is divided he can no longer stand," {cf, Matt 12:26}. Here you see a kingdom divided. These Jewish exorcists, who were the unwitting dupes of satanic philosophy, were attacked by an evil spirit who supposedly should have been on their side. But you see, already the kingdom is beginning to crumble under the attack of truth and love and righteousness and faith, these weapons of the Christians' warfare.

This combined assault went on to yield a tremendous degree of success. Luke now gives us the next scene:

Many also of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all; and they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of God grew and prevailed mightily. {Acts 19:18-20 RSV}

There were two movements in this development. Luke details them for us:

It started with the believers, the Christians, who began to clean up their own lives, who came and divulged their hidden practices, confessed what they were doing in private. Obviously these were relatively new Christians and perhaps they had never thought that anything was wrong with these practices. But as they sat under the teaching of the apostle and saw the kingdom of God and how God longs to set people free, they began to see that what they had been doing -- the astrology, the reliance on horoscopes, the belief in the influence of the stars, and all their other superstitious practices -- had held them in bondage. They were the reason why they were weak and fearful, upset and distressed within themselves. So they began to confess all this and therefore to be free from their bondage.

And that, in turn, precipitated another movement. The pagans around them in the city began to take a second look at their own practices. Many of them who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them when they became Christians under the influence and power of the gospel, and thus they were set free from their own deadly delusion. Again this illustrates how light breaks forth through the church.

It is the church that is the light of the world. When the church begins to straighten out and clean up its life, and act and live as God has called men to do, then the world will begin to see itself as it is, and see what is wrong, and start straightening up and being freed from the practices that are darkening and blinding it, hounding and inhibiting, blasting and ruining.

This is what happened here. They surrendered all their occult literature -- and that was a costly thing to do. As they totalled up the value of these books, and the various paraphernalia that was brought to be burned, it came

to fifty thousand pieces of silver. That is approximately ten thousand dollars, which was a tremendous sum in those days. It meant that these people were forsaking their livelihood. They were actually changing the total pattern of their lives, as they saw that they could no longer practice the occult and live as Christians too. It revealed how willing they were to be free from this terrible practice.

Someone told me just this morning of a similar scene in Idaho this past summer, when great crowds of young people from the hip culture gathered in Boise. There, as they heard the gospel and were convinced of its power, many of them brought their drug paraphernalia and their books on astrology and had a public bonfire. The gospel had set them free of these things.

This account makes very clear the means by which witchcraft seizes hold of people. You see, human beings are not easily invaded by demonic force. God has made man to be a king, and has built into us certain safeguards which operate naturally to keep us independent, free from control by these demonic forces which are supernatural and present all around us. So they cannot force their way into a human life. They cannot overpower us and take possession, though they long to do so. What they must do, therefore, is deceive us. They must find a way by which they can trick us into yielding our wills to their influence and power. And when we voluntarily give way, then they move in, possess the mind, control the thoughts, and dominate the whole life.

This was called very sharply to my attention a few years ago when I taught a home Bible class right here in Palo Alto. Among those attending were a number of people who had been involved with witchcraft, scientology, and various other practices of this type. A girl took me aside after a class was over and said,

"I want to ask you about something. You know, I've been having some strange experiences. They started about a year and a half ago when I was a school teacher in Alaska. Another girl and I roomed together. During those long winter evenings, when there was nothing to do, we whiled away the time by amusing ourselves with a Ouija board. We were getting various answers and messages by doing this and we thought of it as nothing but a game.

"But soon I began to be aware of very strange thoughts in my mind when I'd go to bed at night. I would seem to think of certain words and strange things to say. At first I could put them out of my mind and go to sleep. But gradually they became more and more insistent until I finally found that I couldn't sleep unless I'd pay attention to them and think about them. Then these inner voices began to suggest that I take a pencil and write these things down. At first I tried to resist, but they became more and more insistent and I found that I couldn't go to sleep until I'd write down what they told me. It was always filthy, obscene words.

"Then I talked with my roommate and found that she was going through the same experience. Shortly after that we came down here to California. Now I can't go to sleep until I write out, sometimes for hours at a time, all the filthy things which these voices insist that I say. Now," she said, "is this God?"

I said, "No, you are becoming the victim of some of the powers of darkness." I turned to Deuteronomy and showed her what the Word of God said there, warning the people of God against these things which are an abomination to the Lord. She was tremendously helped by this. Then I showed her how to become a Christian, and she received the Lord. I told her to pray and ask God for help whenever she felt this kind of influence. Several weeks later I saw her in a restaurant and she said, "Oh, Mr. Stedman, I can't thank you enough for what you told me. It's been so marvelous to be free from these voices. I've been doing what you suggested whenever they approach and I'm finding that the Lord keeps them away."

This whole business of astrology and horoscopes, of Ouija boards and of scientology, of yogism and other practices of Eastern philosophy -- these are all means by which satanic forces trick us into opening our minds and yielding our wills to them. The books on any of these subjects, if you read them, all suggest that you are going to discover a "hidden" power that few know about. A man writes me almost every week about some new book he has found in the back room of some obscure book store, covered with dust and hidden in the back shelves, and which, he has now discovered, contains the secrets of the universe. "Such tremendous truths it contains!" He says that if I would just read one of these books my eyes would be opened and I'd learn and understand so much that I don't know now. The trouble is that I do not see that he knows any more than I do -- or even as much. But this is the way these evil powers attempt to seize upon us.

Here in Ephesus, Paul and the other Christians, by the power of the truth, broke through this deception. They assaulted this stronghold of evil. They cracked it wide open, so that Luke says, "The word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily," and the city was shaken to its core. In fact, the very next account, which we will take up next Sunday, tells us that a riot was precipitated because of the way the Christians had demoralized the strongholds of evil in this community.

That is how a church ought to operate -- in the power of the Spirit, and by the authority of the Word. There are strongholds like this all around us today, bastions of darkness. Drugs is one, witchcraft another, homosexuality a third, in this area, now. There are a hundred thousand homosexuals in San Francisco alone, being deluded and trapped by a philosophy which tells them that they ought to accept their condition and treat it as though it were normal and natural. This will lock them into a bondage they will never be freed from. How desperately this situation needs the assault of truth and of light, as does the whole matter of crime, and of riot and revolution. God longs to deliver people from these strongholds, and he has given the church this power.

God grant that we may wake up to what we can do in this day, to how the whole nature of life around us can be drastically altered

- By the truth and by the sharing of accepting love,
- By the living demonstration of righteousness, and
- By faith in a living God who opens doors and gives access,

not just for leaders but for anyone, anywhere, who is part of the body of Christ.

God grant that we will open our eyes and minds to understand how much can be done by this church, in this area, according to the pattern which is demonstrated here by the Apostle Paul.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for the truth that is revealed here. We ask you to make our faith grow strong enough to understand that this is what you long to do in this very area. We see similar powers of darkness holding people enthralled, locking them into misery and heartache, superstition and fear, hostility and emptiness. Lord, help us to understand that this is a very strategic time to live, and that we must not waste our time, frittering it away in empty activity. Help us to give ourselves to this exciting, glorious encounter against these powers of darkness. We ask it in Christ's name, Amen.

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