

The Book of Acts: The Spirit Moving

The Word of The Lord Prevails Part II / Acts 19:19-20:1 / May 17, 2026

Introduction:

What do Christians mean when we say that Christians need to change the culture? And what does that look like? I've heard that sentiment from many pastors, authors, media personalities, and influencers over the years. Typically, what I think they mean is that we Christians need to find our way into spheres of political influence that will set the course of conduct in our country and world. Certainly, I believe that Christianity can, does, and should influence culture, and there are countless stories and examples of that influence at work. Cannibalistic tribes in the Amazon turn from their evil when they come to Christ. The slave trade came to an end because of Christians. The system of oppressive caste system in India was and is being confronted by Christians to this day... I could go on and on. So, yes, I do believe that we are called to shape culture, but I don't necessarily think that doing so means we need to gain influence in politics, media, or the internet. When culture changes because of Christianity, it's because the gospel has transformed the hearts of people who repent of their sin and desire to live a life pleasing to their savior. When that happens, extraordinary changes in the world can take place. The last time we were together in the Book of Acts, we saw the gospel collide head-on with the spiritual darkness of the city of Ephesus. The author, Luke, showed us a city consumed by magic, idolatry, superstition, and counterfeit spiritual power. And yet, in the middle of all that darkness, the truth of Christ prevailed. The Apostle Paul, after contending with the Jewish leaders in the synagogue, set his ministry toward the Gentiles of Ephesus. For two years, the apostle toiled between the long hours of tent making and dutifully teaching those who would hear him in the hall of Tyrannus. Not only that, he healed people of their infirmities, cast out demons that others could not, and displayed real spiritual power that others tried to replicate but failed. But the man himself was nothing special; it was the God that he served that made the difference in exposing the counterfeits and pointing people to the truth that Christ was Lord. The name of Jesus exposed lies, cast down false power, and transformed hearts. And at some point, so many hearts had been turned to Christ that a monumental shift in the culture of Ephesus took place. You might remember how the passage ended:

Acts 19:19-20

¹⁹ And a number of those who had 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. ²⁰ So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

That verse serves as both a conclusion and a transition to today's passage. Luke is intentionally reminding us that no matter what opposition comes next, the gospel is not fragile. The word of the Lord does not merely survive in hostile environments; it prevails. This is important because the opposition Paul faces in our passage today looks different from the opposition we saw last time. That conflict was about spiritual deception and the gospel confronting false power. This time, the conflict centers on cultural disruption when the uncontrollable gospel threatens financial interests, civic pride, and the idols of an entire city. When people genuinely come to Christ, everything begins to change. Their desires change, their priorities change, their spending changes, their speech changes, and their loyalties change. Eventually, when enough people are transformed by Jesus, the culture around them begins to feel the effects. That's exactly what happens in Ephesus.

Acts 19:21-22

A Riot at Ephesus

²¹ Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."²² And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.

As we touched on earlier, Paul has been doing ministry in Ephesus for about two years. But he knows his time there will not last forever, and he desires to revisit churches he had already planted. Then, after travelling to Jerusalem, he plans to eventually make his way to Rome, the center of the known world. One of the themes you continually see throughout Acts is that the mission of God cannot be contained geographically. The gospel continues pressing outward into the Gentile world exactly as Jesus promised. Sending Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia ahead of him makes sense, and Paul is no stranger to operating without his helpers. But, before Paul leaves Ephesus, something troubling happens. Luke says:

Acts 19:23

²³ About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way.

The Greek adverb translated as "no" here can sometimes mean the absolute negative or opposite of what is being described. In other words, that's Luke's understated way of saying absolute chaos broke out. Notice something important here. The great disturbance is "concerning the Way." In Luke's eyes, Paul is not necessarily the primary target of this riot, though he is its subject. If Paul's accusers were successful in their indictment, it would only be a short distance from either expelling believers from the city or worse. Christianity had become visible enough in Ephesus that the city could no longer ignore it. Why? Because transformed people transform their environment. The gospel had begun changing lives so deeply that it was now affecting the economy of the city itself. An economy built upon the lies of idolatry.

Acts 19:24–27

²⁴ For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. ²⁵ These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. ²⁶ And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. ²⁷ And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship."

The temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Pilgrims traveled from all over the Roman Empire to worship there, especially during the month-long festival dedicated to the goddess. As a merchant and port city, there was no shortage of clientele who would gladly pay homage to the Greek goddess by using the temple prostitutes for their services. The worship of Artemis was woven into every part of Ephesian life, including their identity, culture, and economics. Demetrius, a silversmith who creates miniature shrines of the goddess, realizes something alarming. The gospel has been bad for business. Listen again to what he says: "This Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people." Enough people had abandoned idolatry because of Christ that local businessmen were beginning to feel financial strain. The gospel was no longer a belief system amongst the sea of beliefs in the city. It had become utterly disruptive. And I want you to notice something else about Demetrius' speech. He frames the issue spiritually, but underneath it all is greed. He talks about Artemis, about the glory of her temple, and about civic pride. But the first and real issue that he brings forward is money. "Our wealth comes from this business." That's the heart of it. Big idols in any culture are often being protected by profit. Just as in those days, entire industries are being fueled by the idolatry of our culture, and, like Demetrius dressing up his argument in religious zeal, our culture will hide its idols behind ideas like empowerment, bodily autonomy, and success. Our culture may not build silver shrines, but we still

worship. Whether money, pleasure, success, approval, sexual freedom, power, or comfort. Anything we love, trust, fear, or obey more than God becomes an idol. And because people will passionately defend them, idols never surrender quietly. That's true in Ephesus, and it's still true today. The gospel always creates conflict wherever idols are being protected because it radically changes our hearts' orientation by declaring that Jesus is Lord. And if Jesus is Lord, then every false god must bow.

Acts 19:28–29

²⁸ When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” ²⁹ So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s companions in travel.

Notice how quickly the city descends into chaos. The Ephesian theatre, said to be able to house 25,000 people, is where the crowd becomes enraged. Their response is emotional, reactive, and explosive. Seeing how fragile their idols were creates fear and anger in their hearts. If Jesus is truly Lord, then Artemis is nothing; their worship is empty; and their identity must change. And when people sense their idols being threatened, anger often becomes the defense mechanism. That fact is true in all of us. Whenever the Lord presses on an idol in our hearts, we often resist. When Jesus confronts our pride, we defend ourselves. When He confronts our greed, we rationalize. When He confronts our sin, we excuse it. Because idols never surrender quietly.

Acts 19:30–31

³⁰ But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. ³¹ And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater.

You have to appreciate Paul's courage here. The man wants to walk directly into the middle of a riot. But it also tells you something about Christian wisdom that the disciples would stop him. Courage and recklessness are not the same thing. Paul is willing to suffer for Christ, but the believers around him recognize this moment would accomplish nothing except unnecessary danger. Even local officials who respected Paul urged him not to go. And notice again what this reveals. The gospel had impacted people across all levels of society. Even influential leaders in Ephesus had become sympathetic toward Paul and his ministry.

Acts 19:32

³² Now 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.

Isn't that incredible? Most of the crowd doesn't even know why they're angry. They are simply swept up into the outrage. Mob mentality is not new. Confusion is always the fruit of false worship. Idolatry promises clarity and fulfillment, but it produces chaos. Only Christ brings truth, order, and peace.

Acts 19:33–34

³³ Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defense to the crowd. ³⁴ But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

Alexander was not a Christian. He was a Jewish man pushed forward by the local Jewish community in Ephesus to dissociate themselves from Paul and the Christians during the riot. And yet, because Paul was also Jewish, for two hours, thousands of confused and angry people screamed the same phrase over and over again. “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” This is emotional frenzy, not worship rooted in truth.

And notice the irony. If Artemis were truly powerful, why does the crowd feel the need to defend her so desperately? False gods constantly require reinforcement because they cannot sustain themselves. But Jesus does not need defending through emotional outrage. He reigns whether people acknowledge Him or not because His absolute sovereignty cannot be denied.

Acts 19:35–37

³⁵ And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, “Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky? ³⁶ Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. ³⁷ For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess.

What does the town clerk mean about the “sacred stone that fell from the sky?” Ancient peoples often honored meteorites that had fallen from the heavens because it was thought they came from the gods. Like those cults, Ephesus had been “blessed” by the presence of one such stone that was identified with Artemis. Perhaps the term ‘fell from the sky’ was deliberately used to answer Paul’s argument that “gods made by human hands are no gods at all”. At the center of Ephesian worship was an object not made by human hands! The city clerk asserted that these claims about the city and its heaven-sent stone were “undeniable”, though Paul would likely have challenged them if he had been given an opportunity. Think about that... a rock, at some point in the distant past, for unknown reasons, traveled outside its orbit of the sun in the asteroid belt and traversed 111 million miles of empty space before crashing down on Earth near Ephesus, where it became an icon of a pagan religion for 1,000+ years, but is now being used as evidence to defend Paul in the middle of a riot. What a convenient coincidence... Or was it?

Acts 19:38-41

³⁸ If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. ³⁹ But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. ⁴⁰ For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.” ⁴¹ And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

Ironically, the thing that calms the crowd is not spiritual truth, but political fear. Rome did not tolerate disorder, and according to historical accounts, Ephesus had come under Roman scrutiny twice in the 1st Century because of similar rioting. The city clerk realized it could bring consequences from the authorities, and just like that, the assembly dispersed. Once again, the word of the Lord prevails. The gospel survives another attack. Not because Christians fight back violently, nor because Paul manipulates the crowd. Not because the church seizes political power, but because God sovereignly protects His mission.

Acts 20:1

¹ After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia.

I love that verse. After all the chaos, Paul gathers believers together and encourages them. That’s the heart of a shepherd. His concern is not merely escaping danger; his concern is strengthening the church. And with that, the mission continues, the gospel keeps moving, and the word of the Lord keeps prevailing. Church, let me ask you something. Do you understand that Christianity is not merely about adding Jesus to your life? Do you understand that if you desire change in our world today, we must live in accordance with what we profess with our lips? Christ came to reign. And when we obey our King, the idols in our lives

begin to fall. That's why the gospel feels offensive at times. Because it confronts the false things we worship. But that confrontation is actually mercy. Because idols always overpromise and underdeliver, Artemis could never save Ephesus. Likewise, money can never save you. Pleasure can never satisfy your soul. Success can never forgive your sin. Only Christ can do that. Because every one of us has sinned against a holy God by worshipping created things instead of our Creator. We have trusted in ourselves rather than Him, and our sin rightly deserves judgment. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ by sending His Son to live a life of sinless obedience and perfect love. And then, as a sacrifice without blemish, He willingly went to the cross where He bore the wrath of God in our place. And after three days, He rose from the dead in victory over sin, death, and hell. He now calls all people everywhere to repent from idolatry and believe the gospel by trusting in His forgiveness and following Him faithfully. That is the call of the gospel. Let me close with these simple applications:

1. Do you find yourself hesitating to live boldly for Christ for fear of persecution and hatred? Then trust in the sovereignty of our King and His unfailing mission that not even the gates of hell could overcome. No matter how loud the opposition becomes, trust in Christ that His word will still increase.

2. Are you protecting any idols in your heart? What thing in your life are you unwilling to surrender whenever Christ confronts it? Because whatever sits on the throne of your heart besides Jesus will only bring confusion, anger, and ultimately destroy you. So repent of your idolatry and believe the gospel.

3. Do you desire real lasting change in our world where the influence of Christ is clearly seen and felt? Then stop trusting in the power and methods of this world to do so. Instead, trust in Christ's power to transform hearts by sharing your faith with others. No matter how chaotic the world appears, the word of the Lord still prevails mightily. Do you believe that? The same Christ who transformed Ephesus is still transforming the world today. And He does so one heart at a time.