



At Ephesus
The Clash of Gospel and Culture
Acts 19

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia
©Monty Watson – August 9, 2026

AT EPHESUS
THE CLASH OF GOSPEL AND CULTURE
Acts 19

“I’m fighting a battle You’ve already won!”¹ Jesus Christ sacrificed his life on the cross to pay the penalty for sin. But then He rose from the dead and now sits on His throne in heaven. Through Jesus, the battle is already won!² As the Scripture says, “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57, NAS).

However, as I said on July 4th weekend as we celebrated the 250th anniversary of our nation, we are filled with feelings of pride and feelings of concern. Sadly today, there is no consensus on who we are or what we should be. We are a divided nation. “IN GOD WE TRUST” may be on our money, but the consensus of faith upon which our nation was founded no longer exists.

Christian author Natasha Crain confirms this when she writes. “As Christians, we must grapple not only with the result of worldviews shifting over time, but also with the increasing militance many are using to proactively push Christian values out of public life.”³

Which raises the question, how are we to engage our culture? The easy way is to compromise and become like the culture. Or just as bad, withdraw and isolate from the culture. The better way, the biblical way, is to engage the culture. To speak up with conviction on the moral issues of our day. To show compassion for the human needs of our day. Yet, the overwhelming priority in influencing our culture, is to preach and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is not a message about fighting the culture war, although the clash between worldviews is very real. This is a message about our mission.

Seminary president Al Mohler writes, “As Christians continue to face the stiff wind of opposition from the storm of the secular age, we must continue to be faithful. We must say and tell what we know to be true.”⁴ And what is true? That Jesus Christ is both Savior and Lord!⁵

What should concern our hearts most, and what should break our hearts, is not political differences, but the great spiritual conflict that exists in our country today. It should break our hearts that Jesus offers salvation, grace, forgiveness, eternal life, and eternal joy, and yet so many ignore Him and reject Him. The great conflict of our day is belief versus unbelief. And as Christians, it should break our hearts. So much so that we must share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁶

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. The book is filled with dramatic events and incredible stories of faith. ***In Acts 19, in Ephesus, we see the clash between the Gospel and culture. We see the Gospel as a movement of God penetrating culture and penetrating human hearts. And today, the mission continues, and it’s still about Jesus. And Jesus is calling each of us to be a part of the mission.***

EPHESUS – 53 AD

Acts 19 records what happened in Ephesus around 53 AD, twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus. Ephesus was a port city on the coast of the Aegean Sea. Today, it is located in modern-day Turkey. It was important for several reasons.

Politics dominated Ephesus, with inscriptions on every building declaring Caesar as god. A temple was built on the highest point in Ephesus to honor the Roman emperor Domitian. It was the first thing one would have seen arriving in port. The tower was a statue of Domitian standing on top of all the other gods in Ephesus, explicitly implying that he was the greatest of all. Domitian was notorious, insisting that everyone worship him and persecuting any who refused.

Ephesus was an academic center, home to the famous Library of Celsus, which housed over 12,000 ancient scrolls. It was the third largest library in the world.

Ephesus was an entertainment center, home to the largest amphitheater in the world with seating capacity for 25,000 people. It was used for athletic events, gladiator contests, and musical theater.

The agora, the marketplace, was home to hundreds of shops. Ephesus was a port city and goods from all over the world were sold in the agora – silks and spices, tools and textiles, food and clothing. An incense burner was located at the entrance, where a person was required to burn incense to a pagan god before entering the marketplace. You can see how this would have been a problem for Christians.

Ephesus was home to 14 pagan gods. Queen of the gods was Artemis, also called Diana. The Temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was larger than a football field, with 127 massive columns holding up the roof, each 60 feet high. Artemis was the goddess of fertility and sexuality and depicted by a multi-breasted statue. Temple prostitutes were available at any hour of the day for worship. Daily, drunken feasts and orgies were part of the worship experience. Today nothing remains of the Temple of Artemis but a few stones.

When Paul came to town, Christianity challenged the way of life and way of religion in Ephesus.

WHAT HAPPENED IN EPHESUS

Acts 19 records five scenes, five snapshots of what happened in Ephesus.

1 – When Paul arrived in Ephesus he met a handful of supposed believers. He asked if they had received the Holy Spirit, and they said they had never heard of the Holy Spirit.⁷ But they had been baptized by John. Then Paul said, “‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:4-5, ESV). The text says there were twelve of them, and Paul had laid his hands on them, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit.⁸

For three months, Paul taught them about the kingdom of God. “But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:9-10, ESV).

Notice, some believed and some did not. This points to the clash. A movement of the Gospel and opposition to the Gospel.

2 – The second snapshot. Verse 11, “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them” (Acts 19:11-12, NIV). This sounds superstitious, but it actually happened. God was moving and people were being healed and delivered.

Again, this points to the clash. Miracles versus evil spirits. A movement of the Gospel and opposition to the Gospel.

3 – A third snapshot. Verse 13, “Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, ‘In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.’ Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. But the evil spirit said, ‘Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?’” (Acts 19:13-15, NIV).

They tried to copy Paul. They stole Jesus’ name and tried to use it as an incantation. They tried to fabricate miracles. But the demon inside one person said, “I know Jesus and I know Paul, but who are you?” Verse 16, “The evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding” (Acts 19:16, NIV).

Again the clash. The Gospel versus false prophets. A movement of the Gospel and opposition to the Gospel. Yet, Luke writes, “This became known to all who lived in Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified” (Acts 19:17, NAS).

4 – The fourth snapshot. Verse 18, “Many of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone, and they added up the prices of the books and found it to be fifty thousand pieces of silver” (Acts 19:18-19, NAS).

This was a sign of true repentance. Forsaking sorcery and burning their books on magic. This was a sign of the genuineness of their conversion to Christ.

Again the clash. The Gospel versus magic and sorcery. A movement of the Gospel and opposition to the Gospel. Yet, Luke writes, “The word of the Lord was growing and prevailing mightily” (Acts 19:20, NAS).

5 – The fifth snapshot. Christian influence was so pervasive that it affected the economy. When people became Christian, they stopped buying idols and it cut into the profit of the merchants.⁹ Demetrius was a silversmith who made shrines of Artemis, and he called all the

merchants together and said, “Our prosperity depends on this business. Not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded a considerable number of people to turn from us, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all. Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and be robbed of her magnificence” (Acts 19:25-27, NAS). The crowd was enraged and dragged some of the disciples into the amphitheater, and for two hours, the crowd chanted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (Acts 19:28, 34, NAS).

Again, the clash between the Gospel and culture. Yet, with these five stories, five times Luke declared victory.

- “All who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10, NAS).
- “God was performing extraordinary miracles” (Acts 19:11, NAS).
- “Fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified” (Acts 19:17, NAS).
- “The word of the Lord was growing and prevailing mightily” (Acts 19:20, NAS).
- “A considerable number” were persuaded and turned to the Lord (Acts 19:26, NAS).

From 53-55 AD, a dramatic movement of God swept the city, hundreds were converted, forsaking their idols and turning to Jesus. And Ephesus became a hub of Christianity from which the Gospel spread to other parts of the world.

THE CLASH

A few years later, Paul wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus, a letter filled with rich theology and discipleship. He also warned them of spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare which he had faced years earlier. In Ephesians 6, Paul pulled back the curtain to reveal an unseen reality, to reveal an invisible war in the heavenly places over the soul of every human being.

When it comes to spiritual warfare, people go to one of two extremes. Some deny it and others are obsessed with it. I want to discount some of the silliness up front. One man told me about a time when his pants fell down, and he knew it was a sign that Satan was trying to trip him up. I think that’s silly.

But I firmly believe that Satan wants to distract us, discourage us, deceive us, divide us, and destroy us. I believe Satan goes after marriages. I believe Satan goes after pastors and churches. I believe Satan is thrilled with abortion and atheism. I believe Satan is behind terrorism and sex trafficking. I believe Satan is behind child abuse and government corruption. I believe all the injustice and immorality in the world is stirred by the hand of the evil one.

In a dramatic ending to his letter to the Ephesians, Paul warned them, and he warns us. “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will

be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:10-12, NAS).

“Put on the full armor of God so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11, NAS). And remember, “You are from God and have overcome, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4, ESV).

In spite of spiritual warfare, what did Luke write about the events in Ephesus? “The name of the Lord Jesus was magnified ... and the word of the Lord was growing and prevailing mightily” (Acts 19:17, 20, NAS). And today, as we experience the clash of Gospel and culture, we can trust that God will prevail.

Back to the question I asked at the beginning. How are we to engage our culture? The easy way is to compromise and become like the culture. Or just as bad, withdraw and isolate from the culture. The better way, the biblical way, is to engage the culture. To speak up with conviction on the moral issues of our day. To show compassion for the human needs of our day. Yet, the overwhelming priority in influencing our culture, is to preach and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is not a message about fighting a culture war, although the clash between worldviews is very real. This is a message about our mission.

What should break our hearts is that Jesus offers salvation, grace, forgiveness, eternal life, and eternal joy, and yet so many ignore Him and reject Him. The great conflict of our day is belief versus unbelief. And as Christians, it should break our hearts. So much so that we must share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The mission continues and Jesus is calling each of us to be a part of the mission.

EPHESUS – 90 AD

Yet the mission stalls when we lose the thrill of grace. The mission stalls when the thrill of God’s amazing grace no longer burns in our hearts. And that’s what happened in Ephesus forty years later.

Forty years later, around 90 AD, the book of Revelation records the sad story of the church at Ephesus. The church which had experienced a great movement of God had left their “first love.”

In Revelation 2-3, Jesus spoke to seven churches. To the church at Ephesus, He began with a compliment. “I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false, and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary” (Revelation 2:2-3, NAS). Jesus complimented their deeds, their toil, and their perseverance. They exposed false teachers and did not compromise theologically. They were not ashamed to bear the name of Jesus in public, and they had not grown weary. Sounds like a great church.

But Jesus also confronted the church at Ephesus. “But I have this against you, that ***you have left your first love***” (Revelation 2:4, NAS). Forty years earlier, the church experienced a great movement of God. But 40 years later, they had left their first love. They believed the right things, they did the right things, ***but they did not love Him like they used to.***

And what happens when that happens? The mission stalls when we lose the thrill of grace. The mission stalls when the thrill of God’s amazing grace no longer burns in our hearts.

In Acts 19, Ephesus is an inspiration to us, the great story of the movement of God. In Revelation 2, Ephesus is a warning to us, the sad story of losing our first love.

If we’ve lost it, how do we get it back? Jesus tells us. Two words. ***“Remember ... and repent”*** (Revelation 2:5, NAS). Repent of what? He’s not talking about immorality. He’s not talking about theological compromise. Repent of what? Of losing the thrill of His amazing grace. And how do we get it back? “Remember.”

Of all the instructions Paul gave Timothy, one jumps off the page. “Oh Timothy, whatever you do, remember Jesus Christ” (2 Timothy 2:8, NAS). As Anne Graham Lotz suggests, go back to the cross “and take a good, long look.”¹⁰

Remember the cross. Remember His blood. Remember His suffering. Remember His sacrifice, sacrificing His life and dying in our place. Remember His grace, forgiving us of everything we’ve ever done wrong. Remember how much Jesus loves us. And remember His resurrection, the promise of our resurrection, of eternal life and eternal joy.

As Paul said to Timothy, “Remember Jesus Christ.” And may His love for us stir our love for Him.¹¹

CONCLUSION

In Acts 19, in Ephesus, we see the clash between the Gospel and culture. We see the Gospel as a movement of God penetrating culture and penetrating human hearts. And today, the mission continues, and it’s still about Jesus. And Jesus is calling each of us to be a part of the mission.

Yes or no, will you be a part of the mission?

Oh Lord, may we experience You moving in our community. Give us boldness and compassion to speak and to tell people about Your amazing grace.

NOTES

¹ Lyrics to “You’ve Already Won,” recorded by Shane and Shane, written by Shane Barnard and Bryan Fowler, The Worship Initiative, LLC.

² See John 16:33, Romans 8:31, 8:37-39, 1 Corinthians 15:57, Ephesians 2:4-6, 1 John 4:4.

³ Natasha Crain, *Faithfully Different – Regaining Biblical Clarity in a Secular Culture* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2022), page 40.

⁴ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *The Gathering Storm – Secularization, Culture, and the Church* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2020), page 15.

⁵ He is the Son of God and the only way to God.

⁶ Mohler, pages 16-17. Mohler writes, “Christians not only must confront this storm with the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must do so with full faith. Our hope does not rest with temporal political victory – though it understands the importance of politics – it rests in the One who sits at the right hand of throne of God ... Christians, therefore, cannot be silent ... We bear a very real cultural responsibility ... We have one gospel hope – the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must be, as the apostle Paul said, ‘not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes’ (Romans 1:16).”

⁷ Acts 2 records what happened to Christians one day in Jerusalem. But there were hundreds of Christians in other cities who became Christians before the cross, before the resurrection, and before Pentecost. That’s why there was a delay in some people receiving the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit fell on the Christians in Jerusalem first. That’s Acts 2. But Acts 8 tells us that Peter and John traveled to Samaria and found Christians without the Holy Spirit. So Peter and John “laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.” The same thing happened in Caesarea in Acts 10. When Peter arrived, he found many believers who did not have the Holy Spirit. So they received the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues. This was to convince Peter that Gentiles could also be saved and receive the Holy Spirit.⁷ And beyond this map, the same thing happened in Ephesus in Acts 19. When Paul arrived, he asked the believers, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit” (Acts 19:2, ESV). So Paul laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues, to prove their faith was authentic.

⁸ For more on this scene, see Darrell Bock, *Acts – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), pages 304-305.

⁹ Something similar happened in Thessalonica, when they people complained, “These men who have upset the world have come here also” (Acts 17:6, NAS).

¹⁰ Anne Graham Lotz, *The Vision of His Glory: Finding Hope through the Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1996, 1997), page 53.

¹¹ See 1 John 4:10.