

Acts 19:11-22

Outward Church: Power Part 1. Religious Power

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Anglican theologian N. T. Wright tells the story of one of Britain's most promising political leaders in the 1960s, George Brown.

When he was a young man, [George Brown] said, he knew that things had to be changed. British society was in a mess; someone needed to get to the levers of power and make things happen, make things different. So he went into politics. But in local politics, even once he'd been elected to council office, he discovered that neither he nor the council had any real power. Things were decided elsewhere. So he decided to run for Parliament. But, he said, when he got into Parliament, he found that members of Parliament didn't have any real power. They could talk, and they could vote, but nothing much seemed to change, and the real decisions still seemed to happen somewhere else. So he pushed his way to the front and got into the Cabinet. To his amazement, it was the same there. And even when he got within one place of the top of the tree, to be Deputy Prime Minister under Harold Wilson, he looked around and still couldn't see where the real power lay. Everyone just seemed to be doing the next thing that came to hand. Things happened but it wasn't obvious why. Where was the power? – Acts for Everyone, Part Two by N. T. Wright

One author defines power this way. "Power is the ability to make something of the world." Power is the ability to change situations and circumstances around us. So where can we find that kind of power? Is power in politics like George Brown hoped? Is power somewhere else? On Wallstreet? In big banks? Do "diamond hands" hold all the GameStop power? When you think about your own life, who has the power? Do you? Your spouse? Your parents? Your employer? Your teacher? Who makes things happen? What would you do to be empowered? What would you do to take control? Run for office? Start a business? Marry rich?

Acts 19 is about power, three types of power: religious power, economic power, and Jesus power. Today we're going to look at how religious power contrasts with the power of Christ. In part two, we'll look at economic power.

Religious power

Religious power uses religion, prayer, worship, liturgy, church, and even supernatural events to exert its control over the world. If "power is the ability to make something of the world," religious power seeks to use religion or even spirits to control people to make something of the world.

a. Religious power values control over the world.

Paul arrived in Ephesus, a place of religious, even supernatural, power. Ephesus had a population of 250,000 people, a quarter a million residents. It is a port city where trade flourishes. It is an economic powerhouse. But most importantly, the temple of Artemis is there. The temple of Artemis was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient world. This picture shows what we think it might have looked like. Inside was an image of Artemis, which the people worshipped, and they believed she fell from heaven (Acts 19:35). The temple functioned as a place of sacrifice, a place of worship, and even a bank.

As a mother goddess Artemis possessed fertility and reproductive power that caused the earth to blossom with life of all kinds. She was the goddess of childbirth and a nourishing mother to all. Animals and wildlife were also a part of her domain and under her control. – Acts Zondervan

The people of Ephesus used cultic worship and magic letters and amulets to exert power. They believed Artemis could change their fate. There was religious, even supernatural power at Ephesus. People believed in Artemis for a reason. I suspect that things happened when they worshipped her. If you want to have a healthy baby and a safe delivery, go to Artemis. If you want your crop harvest to be plentiful, go to Artemis.

We used to have a Hindu temple in the same business complex as our CrossFit gym. Sometimes when I was running around the building, I would see the priests out blessing the cars with fruits and flower offerings. If you want your car to keep you safe and not break down, go to Artemis. Religion values control over life. Religion is when we do things in order for god, gods, or the universe to grant us safety and security.

What sort of things do you do when you want control of your life? When things threaten to spin out of control? Remember Keri Underwood's song "Jesus, Take the Wheel?" "Jesus, take the wheel. Take it from my hands..." I kind of like the song, but I wonder if it would have been so popular if she'd been driving on a nice sunny day, the weather was great, and she wasn't skidding on black ice. We seem to go to Jesus when things get bad and want back control of our life. To be fair to that song, I think the woman gets to the point of desperation and ultimately gives up control of not just the wheel but her entire life. But let's not wait till things get so bad that we have to give everything to Jesus in a dramatic moment.

Can religion give us control of our life? Not really. When Paul comes to Ephesus, he finds it quite powerless. In fact, the people who claimed to believe in Jesus did not have the power of the Holy Spirit. These twelve men hadn't been baptized in Jesus' name and hadn't received the Spirit. Perhaps they're even caught up in the cult. We're going to see that many are. Paul baptizes them, lays hands on them, prays for them, and the Holy Spirit shows up in power (Acts 19:1-10). It leads to all the Jews and Greeks in Asia hearing of Christ. *Religious power values control over the world, but...*

b. Jesus' power transforms peoples' lives.

Verse 10 says that Paul did discipleship, "This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord." People hear about Jesus, and their lives are changing. And God is doing it in the most unusual way.

Acts 19:11-12 (ESV)

¹¹ And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, ¹² so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

People were just touching objects that he had touched and getting healed, or demons were fleeing. As Protestants, we're not used to the idea of church relics, which are religious objects attributed to Christian saints (a bone, a parchment, etc.) that were believed to have a special power. There's a lot of deceit around these kinds of objects; many aren't trustworthy. In fact, I don't think it's a good idea to try and copy what we see God doing here. I wouldn't search for power in objects. Just because we see something described in Acts doesn't mean it's prescribed for us today.

However, the woman who suffered from bleeding touched Jesus' garment and was healed (Matthew 9:18-26). But what does Jesus say? Is it actually his cloak that heals her or something else?

Matthew 9:22 (ESV)

Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well.

It's not the cloak that heals her, but Jesus uses her faith to heal her. Likewise, God is giving Paul's clothing and objects supernatural power so that people will listen to his message about Jesus. Ephesus is saturated with cult and magical objects. God is "condescending" to the culture; he's lowering himself to their level in order to redeem them. Condescension isn't always bad. I condescend when I lay on the floor to play with my daughter. I lower myself to her level, not out of pride but out of love and care for her. God condescends in Ephesus to transform people out of the cult and dead religious actions. That's what he does for us. He condescends to our level, to redeem us, and transform us.

I recently picked back up the autobiography, [*The Death of a Guru*](#), this week. It's the story of how an Indian holy man, well, actually a teenager named Rabi, became a believing Christian. His father had been a great Yogi, someone who passed through the spiritual realm through trances and meditations. He had followed in his path, becoming a great Yogi by his teenage years. He became wealthy and semi-famous. People came to him for blessings. But even though he was able to do things like astral projection and talk with spirits, he always found the spirits to be angry, and he never felt at peace.

One day Rabi was enjoying a jungle walk and meditating on his oneness with all of nature when a giant cobra slithered up behind him to kill him. When he turned around and saw it, it frightened him and actually looked like the snake on the neck of the gods he worshiped, Shiva. It hissed at him and was about to strike him. And at that moment he remembered something his mom had once told him but he had forgotten:

"Rabi, if ever you're in real danger and nothing else seems to work, there's another god you can pray to. His name is Jesus."

"Jesus! Help me!" I tried to yell, but the desperate cry was choked and hardly audible.

To my utter astonishment, the snake dropped its head to the ground, turned clumsily around, and wriggled off at a great rate into the underbrush.

He was amazed, but even then, he didn't believe right away. Later he had a medical emergency where his appendix almost burst. After his surgery, he was walking back from the bathroom when he almost lost consciousness. As he was about to fall, he cried for Jesus, and a hand lifted him up, even though he knew no one was there. After that, he felt strangely calm. Someone left a Christian pamphlet in his room. It moved him, but still, he wasn't ready yet. Jesus was slowly but surely peeling his hands off control over his world. Jesus was slowly but surely speaking to him in a way he could understand. How is Jesus trying to get ahold of your heart? How is he peeling your hands off control of your world?

Maybe you're like Rabi. You're using religious or even supernatural powers to try and control your world, to try and get a blessing. Jesus wants to transform you from the inside out. That's where true power is, in him. Jesus is fundamentally different than religion. *Religious power values control over the world but Jesus' power transforms peoples' lives.* Also...

a. Religious power uses Jesus as a means to an end.

We see a starting account of people trying to use Jesus' power for their own means in Ephesus.

Acts 19:13-16 (ESV)

¹³Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." ¹⁴Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. ¹⁵But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" ¹⁶And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

Several Jews, who practice exorcisms and appear to maybe mixing cult-like practices into their religion, try to cast a demon out in Jesus' name and Paul's name. They don't actually know Jesus or Paul, but they're trying to exert religious power, which uses God as a means to an end. They're running a business. They're making money. And if they can find a more effective charm or incantation, they can make more money.

But the demon doesn't cooperate. Instead, he says, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" That must have been terrifying because then the demon jumps on them, strips them naked, beats them, and sends all seven sons fleeing from the house. In that culture, nakedness was incredibly shameful (ours too). They were trying to use Jesus for their purposes, and it led to their ruin and shame. Religious power uses Jesus as a means to an end.

How might you be using Jesus as a means to an end? When you pray, what do you pray about? Is God your cosmic vending machine? Punch in the right prayer, pay your church attendance, and out pops a new trampoline? I remember praying for a trampoline when I was a kid, and then we got one. It was pretty exciting. God loves to give good things to his people. That's not the issue. The issue is when we want those good things more than we want God himself. We can pray for a healthy and safe family, for a good job, for a successful church, but most of all, God just wants to give us himself, no matter our circumstances. Jesus wants to satisfy our hearts in ways our cravings never can. The question is. Will we take the time to seek him? Or will we only go to him when we want something? God exposes our hearts so he can redeem us. That's what he did in Ephesus.

b. Jesus' power transforms darkness into light.

What happened with the seven sons of Sceva made a difference in the community of Ephesus.

Acts 19:17-20 (ESV)

¹⁷ And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. ¹⁸ Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. 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.

When the people realized what had happened, they brought their magic books and amulets and threw them in a fire. One commentary said, "it would require over 150 people working a full year to equal the financial value of these scrolls." You could fund a medium-sized business with all of that money. They could have funded Christian missionary efforts all across the ancient world if they'd just sold the scrolls, but Jesus had set them free, and that made all the difference. *Jesus' power transforms darkness into light.*

Jesus wants to set you free from your darkness too. He wants to transform the darkness of culture through his light. That's what Jesus does, doesn't he? He takes broken people and makes them well. He takes a broken city and renews it. There's another story in the gospel of Luke, the same author of Acts, about Jesus casting out demons from a man (Luke 8:26-39). When Jesus meets him, he's actually naked, living in tombs. He's completely shamed, completely alone, except for his nightmares and demons. When the demons encounter Jesus, they beg Jesus not to torment them. They know who Jesus is. They know his power.

Jesus casts the demons out of a man into a herd of pigs that run down a steep bank and drown in a watery abyss. Then Jesus and his disciples clothe the man and leave him in his right mind, healed and whole. The healed man goes home and tells everyone how much Jesus has done for him. *Jesus' power transforms darkness into light.*

I just read the chapter where the Indian Yogi Rabi comes to Jesus. He comes to Jesus because one of his classmates, a Christian girl, comes to his home and tells him about Jesus. He's enraged and angry, but inside he knows that what he has isn't working, and there seems to be something to this Jesus. He finds out the one true God is a God of love and forgiveness, not hate like Shiva. As his friend is preparing to walk out the door, she says, "Before you go to bed tonight, Rabi, please go on your knees and ask God to show you the truth—and I'll be praying for you!" Strangely, he does pray, and God answers his prayer. Rabi goes to a church service at a broken-down house, but the people are honestly and genuinely worshipping God, and it leads him to Christ Jesus.

Maybe you too need to pray, "God, if you're real, please reveal yourself to me?" Jesus wants to meet you where you're at. Maybe you need to confess you've been Jesus as a means to an end. I know I struggle with that. Let's pray and ask Jesus to forgive us and transform our hearts.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen on [Apple Podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. What is power? How would you explain religious power?
2. How is Jesus' power different than the power the world offers?
3. What is the power of the gospel, and what can it do?
4. How do we see the gospel renew individuals and a city?
5. Have you wanted things more than Jesus? What do you need to confess?

End by praying for Jesus to transform your heart.

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