

Many times in my life I have been somewhere in public, such as a restaurant or an office, and I have seen a large potted tree and thought to myself, “That’s beautiful. What a cool fig tree or olive tree or citrus tree.” Because I love trees, I get closer to better appreciate it, and then I think, “Wait a second. Is that tree real?” I can’t tell by looking; I have to reach out and touch the leaves and the trunk to know for sure. From a distance, an artificial tree and a real tree may appear almost identical, but they are fundamentally different. One is simply a compilation of plastic, painted and disguised to look like the real thing. The other has roots stretching into soil. It drinks water and absorbs nutrients, it stretches, it grows, it photosynthesizes, it converts poisonous gas into life-giving oxygen. The two might appear the same initially, but they are worlds apart.

The same can be true for a church. A church may have a building, maintain a website, hold services, and have all the appearances of a church, while in reality it’s artificial, man-made, fake. But another church, when you get up close, you know beyond a shadow of a doubt, it’s alive. It is rooted in the person of Jesus, it is soaking up living water and is well nourished, its leaves are lush, it’s producing fruit, it has a fragrant aroma, it’s growing, and though you can’t always see it, it’s able to take in the toxins from the environment around it and, by God’s grace, turn them into something that is life-giving.

Many people have been a part of a dead or diseased church and are understandably very cautious about engaging with any form of organized religion. But once you’ve experienced a healthy, thriving, dynamic church that is alive with the Spirit and the love of God, you realize that the Church is the primary way that God is active in the world today, and not only do you want to be a part of it, you want to contribute to it.

As we continue in our series in the book of Acts, we get a window in the early church in the city of Ephesus. It was a living, dynamic, thriving church! As we read Acts 19 and 20 today, we are going to learn about the spirit-empowered ministry of the church, the culture-changing impact of the church, and then finally the heart-felt shepherding of the church. Let’s dive in.

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. 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.

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.

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 the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.” Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest,

were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?” Then the man who had 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 19:8-16)

Spirit-Empowered Ministry

The church in Ephesus was alive! How do we know it was alive? They had a *Spirit-empowered ministry*. We see proof of that in many ways.

Faithful Preaching

Whenever you see Spirit-empowered ministry you will always find *faithful preaching*. Paul spent three months in the synagogue with the Jewish community, showing them that Jesus was the Messiah God promised, that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the prophecies God made. Many believed, but some refused. They heard all they wanted from Paul. In pride they refused to change their minds, so they closed the doors, letting Paul know he was no longer welcome. Paul said, “OK, I’ll go to the public lecture halls, where everyone in the entire city can come and hear about Jesus.” One door closed, but God opened another door. Because Paul preached there in the city for everyone to hear for two continuous years, “All the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10).

A church that is alive, a church that is moved by the Spirit of God, will always be a church that continuously and courageously proclaims God’s word. People ultimately don't need a pastor’s personal opinions. They don't need another life hack. They don't need four steps to manage their anxiety. They don't need five principles for winning with money. They need God’s Word. They need the life changing gospel of Jesus Christ. I promise that as long as I am a pastor at this church, when we gather, we will open the Bible, read from God’s Word, and proclaim truth from the Scriptures! If we want a Spirit-empowered ministry, it begins with following the Scriptures the Spirit inspired and speaks through.

Miraculous Healing

“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). When people turned to God, they not only heard stories of how God worked miraculously in the past, in other places, and for other people, but they also witnessed God do miracles in their own midst. People with sicknesses were cured. Paul didn’t have the ability to go to everyone, but even items he touched were taken to people who were sick, and they were made well, just like when a woman reached out and grabbed the edge of Jesus’ cloak. Immediately Jesus felt power go out from him and she was healed.

I want to be 100% honest with you: there are so many things I don’t understand about miracles. I don’t understand how miracles work, I don’t understand why God chooses to heal some people and not to heal others. I have a thousand questions I would like to have answered about miracles. But there is one thing I know: the God who made this world is still intricately involved in the affairs of

this world, he knows what's going on, he cares deeply, and there is nothing too hard for him to do. Sometimes, in response to our faith and prayers, and because of his compassionate mercy and love, heaven reaches down and changes things that could not be changed any other way. When that happens you know the Spirit of God is moving!

Our elders and pastors are available every Sunday in the connecting place to pray with you and to ask for God's miraculous power to be poured out on your life. It doesn't happen every time, but we've seen incredible answers to our prayers and we hope to see many, many more. Although my health situation has been improving greatly, I'm still taking many medications to fight what's happening in my body. Every time I go to have my blood drawn, I expect the results to come back showing I'm healed. I'm believing 100% for a miracle. But I trust God 100% to care for me no matter the results.

Spiritual Imposters

Spiritual imposters are one very unfortunate aspect of supernatural ministry with powerful proclamation of the word and miraculous healings. Illegitimately riding the coattails of other people who truly know God, while pretending you know God, too, for the sake of personal gain is known as "spiritual grifting." The religious imposters in Ephesus tried to intimidate Paul. They tried to exercise power over dark spiritual forces by using Paul's name, even though they had no real spiritual authority. It did not go well for them. "One day the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?' Then the man who had 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 19:15-16). The truth is, whenever you have something real and powerful, there will always be imitators who swoop in for personal gain.

We see this all the time in the fashion world. Louis Vuitton makes a beautiful bag. It's so nice people want it and pay thousands of dollars for it. Then an impostor comes along and wants to profit off that, so they imitate it, do some sort of cheap knock-off, look-a-like bag, and make money off people. But here's the thing: they can say all the same words, they can do all the same things, but there is no real power or authority in their presence. Because the name of Jesus has real power, and because people who actually know Jesus have real spiritual authority, there will always be imitators and imposters who are cosplaying as the real deal. So we must be discerning, we must be wise, we must know the difference between the genuine and the counterfeit. Sooner or later, like in Acts 19, true colors are always revealed.

Culture-Changing Impact

The Spirit-empowered ministry led to *culture-changing impact*. The Christ-centered ministry was so powerfully at work in Ephesus for so long, that the city started to look like a different place! It changed the local culture and economy.

The Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. 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 fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. (Acts 19:17b-20)

People were placing their faith in Jesus. They were leaving dead, life-less, stale religions and were publicly confessing their sins, turning to Jesus, and renouncing any ties they had with their former way of life. Many of them owned sacred scrolls that had incantations and spells on them, training people in witchcraft. They had extreme value, the modern equivalent of \$10 million dollars. But when they turned to Jesus, they wanted nothing to do with them, so they had a public ceremony and burned them. Some people would have thought, "That's not practical." Why not sell them and fund the church's ministry? Because the scrolls were teaching people how to sin and engage with demons. Imagine today a world-famous pornographer comes to Jesus. He wants to live a God-honoring life and rid himself of all the sin in his past. Should he sell his pornography collections and videos to the highest bidder so that others can sin and he can make money? No. That stuff belongs in hell. Burn it. Destroy it. Start a new chapter beginning today. That's what they did. And they did it publicly, so everyone in the city could see the impact Jesus was having on them.

About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: "You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. 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 is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty." (Acts 19:23-27)

Do you see what's happening here? The people who made the shrines and the statues to the local deities, the people who made their living off the local cults and false religions got together and said, "Ever since the gospel came to town and people started believing in Jesus, our stores have been empty. People aren't buying our trinkets and talismans anymore. We've got to do something about it." They literally said that the temple to Artemis, which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, might end up losing its notoriety and credibility because the Christians wanted people to believe in Jesus.

When the gospel really captures a city, it changes the culture and the landscape. Can you imagine what would happen if so many people were compelled by the gospel that casinos and adult entertainment companies and drug dealers all had their business dry up and they had to find jobs that help people rather than destroy them? Can you imagine what would happen if so many people were compelled by the gospel that the local foster care system didn't have any more work to do, because there were countless qualified families ready to welcome children in, and because moms and dads were staying together, loving their children in a healthy environment?

When the gospel takes over in a revival-type way, it changes the culture. We are seeing signs of the tide turning in our day. Look at college campuses. Over the last few years, at major universities like Ohio State, Auburn, Nebraska, and Iowa, the first-round draft pick football stars are holding open-air revival meetings. The most popular and influential students on campus are preaching the gospel and sharing their faith in Jesus, and hundreds are responding in baptism, right in the center of campus.

When the gospel really comes to your town, it's like a meteor hitting. It makes a change. When the gospel really takes hold, people don't just start attending church more frequently, their character changes, what they consume changes, their business ethics change, how they treat employees changes, what they do with their time and weeks and bank accounts changes, how they raise their families changes. That's what happened in Acts. We are seeing the infancy stages of it today, and we want more!

Heartfelt Shepherd

A Spirit-empowered ministry flows from *heartfelt shepherding*. Our passage ends with Paul meeting with the elders of the church. We can see how much the leaders loved one another, how much they loved the people in the church, and how deeply they wanted the people of the church to be cared for well.

Heartfelt shepherding requires a *Christlike example*. "From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them: 'You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears' (Acts 20:17-19a). Paul wasn't one of those preachers who took the stage, gave a great speech, and then didn't appear again for seven more days. He lived among the people. He was with them, sharing his life. Paul was not one of those preachers who was one way on the stage but a different way off the stage. He lived a life of integrity and character. He was present, he was consistent—he was Christlike. He was humble and vulnerable. There was no task beneath him, no task too small or ignoble he wouldn't do. Because Jesus took the position of the lowest slave to wash feet, Paul served with the deepest humility. He also served with tears—he didn't feel the need to always project strength. He didn't have to pretend to be perfect or have it all put together or not to be impacted by the difficulties of life or the pain of people hurting him. He was vulnerable and real. Humble and honest. When people saw him, they didn't see a perfect person, but they saw someone who was striving to follow Jesus with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. Churches that are vibrant and alive today are churches with Christlike shepherds who are leading by example.

Heartfelt shepherds have an *eternal focus*. "However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace" (Acts 20:24) God placed a call on Paul's life. God didn't call him to a complacent life, to enjoy a nice, upper-middle class, comfortable existence. He called him to a life of purpose and mission and impact. Paul said, "God gave me a race to run. It's a long, grueling, challenging, demanding race with threats and persecution and opposition and imprisonment around every turn. It's also a joyful, life-giving, exhilarating, eternity-altering race. And I refuse to get distracted. I refuse to give up. My eyes are on the prize. And I am running with every ounce of energy I have until everyone has the chance to hear about Jesus!" Churches that are

vibrant and alive today are churches that have shepherds who are 100% committed to preaching the gospel and ushering as many people as possible into the kingdom of heaven. Their hearts never stop beating to see God and people together!

Heartfelt shepherds embrace *a sacred responsibility*. Paul told the leaders of the church, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). These are men Paul led to faith in Christ and mentored for three years. He was leaving town and he expected that he would be arrested and maybe killed and that he would never see these people again, so he imparted to them the importance and weightiness of the role of leading and shepherding God’s church. He said two things. First, “The Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” In other words, God has given you this role. You didn’t earn it. You don’t deserve it. It’s an appointment from God himself. Think about this: God has asked you to take care of his church, the church which he bought with his own blood. The church was important enough for Jesus to die for, to literally give his life and hang on the cross and bleed out for. So when you take care of the church, you must realize what a sacred, holy, awesome responsibility it is. Don’t treat it casually. Don’t be cavalier. Don’t be on coast mode. You’ve been asked to steward the most precious, valuable, eternally significant thing in the entire world—God’s church. Churches that are vibrant and alive today are churches led by shepherds who take their role with reverence and awe and a full appreciation of the sacred task they’ve been given.

Do you remember talking about the tree? Seeing it, admiring it, but having to move up closer to get a better look? If you are trying to grow in your faith, if you are trying to find a church home, my number one encouragement, at The Creek or anywhere else, is to find a church that is alive! Get close and take a look! See if the church is rooted in the soil of God’s Word, see if lives are being changed, see if the environment is being transformed, see if it’s being lovingly watered and pruned and cared for. People can fool you from afar, but you know it’s real when you get close. That’s what we long to be a part of in this place.