

Telling the Story

(Evangelism in the Early Church)

Maurice W. Lusk, III

A bazaar incident occurred in Ephesus when a group of wandering Jewish exorcists (the seven sons of **Scaeva**), having heard Paul cast out demons in the name of Jesus, attempted to use the name of Jesus as a "word of power" to drive out demons by their command. Because they were actually advocates of sorcery and not truly followers of Jesus, the demon they were trying to cast out turned on them and left them brutally beaten and running for their lives.

And this became known to all the Jews and also the Greeks inhabiting Ephesus, and fear fell upon all of them and they were magnifying the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:17).

For some reason this event created a sense of great respect for Paul and he used the interest aroused by it to create greater interest in the identity of this person Jesus the seven sons of **Scaeva** called upon. His efforts resulted in the people magnifying or lifting up (*megaluno* - exalting, lifting high) the name of the Lord Jesus.

From this we can readily conclude that Paul was preaching Jesus as "Lord," which was unique for him as a Jew because only the God of Israel was called by the name *Adonai*, or as it appeared in the Greek Septuagint (LXX), *Kurios*. The gods and goddesses of paganism were not called lords, the Hellenistic Jews, however, called their God Lord, and this was as a substitute for the divine name *Yahweh*, which they believed to be unutterable. The Romans did call the Emperor *Kurios* in Greek and *Dominus* in Latin, but only God and his angels were called "Lord" in the absolute construction in the Scriptures of the Jews. The word *kure*, in the vocative case [the case

of address] and *kurios* without the article could be used in the lesser sense of "sir" or "master." When used with the definite article [an absolute construction] or as a proper title, *Kurios*, in the NT and in Hellenistic Judaism, was a title given only to God and angels who appear as God.

The Burning of the Books of Magic (19:18-19)

Many of the ones having believed came confessing and disclosing the things they had done. 19 And a number of the ones having practiced the arts of magic brought their books [of magic] together and burned them before everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it to be fifty thousand pieces of silver (Acts 19:18-19).

The expression "the ones believing" is set over against the expression, "many of the ones having practiced arts of magic." In the Greek text the expression "the ones having believed," is in the perfect tense (they believed and continued to believe), were coming (imperfect tense - they were continually coming), and were confessing (present tense - they were continually confessing) and disclosing (present tense - they were continually disclosing) the things they had done. Luke is a master of Greek composition and here uses his expertise in the Greek language to communicate a vivid depiction of the events occurring here in Ephesus. The imagery created is that of a continuous and ongoing response to the declaration of Jesus as Lord by Paul his apostle.

Luke's reference to "the ones having practiced the arts of magic" is new to the narrative of the Ephesian episode of Acts 19. One scholar describes the practice of the arts of magic as follows:

These books are parchment booklets and papyrus rolls with magical spells and formulae, directions for making amulets, etc. The so-called *Ephesia grammata* [a part of the magical papyri collection-MWL] enjoyed proverbial status in the classical period. Plutarch observed: 'The magicians charge those possessed by demons to recite the Ephesian writings by

themselves and to pronounce the names.' Even though these papyrus strips with magical words were produced in Egypt, they have a verbal link to Ephesus; this is why Luke could use them to create a local atmosphere. The emperor Augustus ordered two thousand magical books to be burnt; but such burnings of books in antiquity always took place under compulsion, not voluntarily as here in Acts (Hans-Josef Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity*, pp 101-102).

Such books of magic or collections of magical papyri were found in cults of magic and mystery cults. There were similarities between the rituals of the mysteries and the conjuring rituals which were used to bring up a deity or demon who was called upon to make "the magic" or the secret power occur which caused the manipulation of the forces of nature resulting in the effects desired by the practitioners. Many mystery cults were unique unto themselves with a variety of beliefs and rituals, but belief in secret knowledge, which could be used to accomplish the desired ends of the *mystetes* [one in possession of secret knowledge] or sorcerer, was similar.

Both called upon a particular god, goddess, or otherworldly entity to effect the magic of the ritual of the cult. Two different words were used to identify a sorcerer; *magos* meaning "a great one" was the more generic, but the other word is more revealing, which is *pharmakeus* meaning one who knows the magic of plants and can create potions with which they could cast spells. This is the same word used in Modern Greek for a pharmacist, which is very revealing. It would appear that the "magic" the sorcerer possessed was actually knowledge of how to use narcotic drugs to alter the personality or behavior of the one who ingested the potion. Of course, there were words of gibberish uttered over the potion, but that was only for dramatic effect.

The presence of magicians or sorcerers who were believed to have access to otherworldly powers was common. The NT mentions Simon Magus of Samaria (Acts 8:19-24) and Elymas, the Jewish sorcerer of Cyprus (Acts 13:4-12). There were numerous wandering magicians who were known for their ability to expel demons,

perform healings, cast spells, and predict the future. Such was Apollonius of Tyana, who lived during the lifetime of Jesus and is often identified with Jesus by liberal scholars, insisting that Jesus was thought of as a magician by the people of Palestine. Another is Hermes Trismagistus [pronounced Tris/magees/toos, who is the author of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, used by some mystery religions as a collection of revelations from the Greek god Hermes. Its significance is that it had a wide circulation throughout the Hellenistic culture of the Mediterranean world during the first century.

A collection of magical writings similar to what is mentioned here has been discovered in the deserts of Egypt in recent centuries. They were published under the name *The Greek Magical Papyri*, one of which is identified as *The Ephesian Grammata*; i.e., the Ephesian Writing.

Mightily Grew the Word of the Lord (19:20)

So mightily grew the word of the Lord and increased in power (Acts 19:20).

What was the power of the word of the Lord given by Paul that so influenced these people of Ephesus; especially, the Greeks? The driving force of the Greco-Roman culture was power. Magic was all about power. The worship of Artemis (Roman Diana) was about the power to control the forces of nature, to bring the seasons in their order, to make spring follow winter with the return of life to the earth with the growth of crops, livestock, and sons and daughters, then the harvest of the fall followed by the return of death to the earth with the coming of winter.

If Artemis were not willing, these things would not happen. The people lived in fear of the forces of nature. The forces of nature could destroy life with disease, desolation, and death; the fear of the forces of nature is what lay at the heart of every act of homage to the deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon. To be the object of the

displeasure of a deity, especially a *daemon* or evil deity, meant suffering and death.

But this person who was called “an apostle” or spokesman of a messianic deliverer, the one anointed by the one true God of heaven and earth, had entered into this ancient city and announced to them that death, the most feared force of nature, had been destroyed through the death and resurrection of the messianic redeemer who brought new existence to the human race through the creative powers the one and only God who was the Creator of all life. The one through whom this new life had been effected was the Son of God, who had experienced death as a man, but was raised out of death as the first fruit of a new existence of man.

The “herald” of this grand announcement or *euangelion* (a message of great joy) to the human race was a messenger sent from God whose message was a message of reconciliation with the Creator who had created the human race in his own image. Paul identified his role in all this as a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:16-19), whose message was a proclamation of the word of God. The word Paul had brought to Ephesus had the power that the Hellenistic world sought in the practice of magic through its non-intelligible gibberish found in the magical papyri. But, the words Paul had brought them was a story filled with the power of God for their salvation (Rom 1:16), and the more it was believed the more its power increased.

Application

How does one identify with this text? With what or whom would you most identify in this story? We could say that it has no application to our culture in this century. Is there no paganism present in our culture? Even though Luke doesn't give us specifics as to what was going on in the city of Ephesus; Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, some four years later, gives a very vivid description of the pagan culture of Ephesus (Eph 2:1-3; 4:17-5:14 [*passim*]).

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others (Eph 2:1-3).

This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, 18 having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; 19 who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. 20 But you have not so learned Christ, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:17-24).

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you (Eph 4:31-32).

But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; 4 neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. 5 For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. 7 Therefore do not be partakers with them. 8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light 9 (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), 10 finding out what is acceptable to the

Lord. 11 And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. 13 But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light; therefore he says: "Awake, you who sleep, Arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light," (Eph 5:3-13).

Where do we see this in our culture? In the entertainment media, which is undoubtedly one of the most powerful and pervasive forces of darkness in our world. The love of this world (John 15:18-25; 1 John 2:15-17) is evident to any observer looking with popular or academic eyes. The language of a culture is a good indicator of its values and our culture appears to be in a greater depth of moral decay than the pagan cultures of the first century Mediterranean world. How does one evangelize such a culture?

First, we must separate ourselves from the world. Burn your books or whatever is influencing you to ignore the will of God or substitute for the word of God. Secondly, bring attention to your refusal to be a part of the things of the world forbidden by Christ, things, which are inconsistent with the moral character of Jesus, emulated in our lives. Ask: "What would Jesus do?" Third, ask others what they think about the attitude of our culture toward such behaviors as fornication (*porneia* - sexual immorality), dishonesty, greed, and ill-will toward others.

Have you ever had a conversation with a friend, relative, or someone with whom you have a good relationship about what they think of the moral state of affairs as reflected in the media? The subject is not off limits, it's everywhere around us, we have no choice as to whether we want to think about it or not. It's reflected in virtually every aspect of our culture: in the clothing, the music, what we see and hear in every form of media.

Since it is such a pervasive presence, would it be so out of line to bring the subject up, just as a curiosity, as to what they think; especially, if they have children. Ask what they think one can do in order to experience a renewal of their existence in Christ and how

that happens one person at a time. Emphasize, as did Paul and the other early Christians, how cultures are not changed in mass; rather, it always happens one person at a time. That's how God saves the world, one person at a time.

Remember Jesus' words in Matt 7:13-14. Is he saying that most of the human race will be lost? Is that scary? The very possibility that the greater majority of the human race is condemned by the choices they make on a daily basis. This is a reality about which the whole of civilization is in denial. Talking to people about the fact that life is made up of choices and all choices have consequences can lead to some very interesting and insightful conversation. It is a fact that must be acknowledged by every Christian who believes that the Scriptures are inspired of God and that the words found on Jesus' lips are the words he spoke. He did or did he not say:

Enter through the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way leading to destruction, and many are the ones entering through it. How narrow is the gate and difficult the way leading to life, and few are the ones finding it (Matthew 7:13-14).

An interesting conversation point would be the question of what the words "narrow" and "wide" imply or suggest? So also, what does Jesus mean by the words "destruction" and "life?" Do people think that by destruction he meant some kind of life that is less than the life they would get if they were faithful to Christ? Of course, the most probing question has to do with the words "many" and "few." What does the word "many" mean and what does the word "few" mean. Most people would not like for "many" to mean the greater portion of the human race, nor would they want the word "few" to actually mean "not that many."

The common view of universal salvation for the whole of the human race is not possible in view of these words of Jesus. It would not be an exaggeration to think that most people believe that when they die they will return to God by angels as in the TV series "Touched by an Angel." That, however, is fiction and not remotely supported by what is taught in Scripture. This is a sobering thought

and is a good thought to plant in the mind of someone who may not be aware of these words of warning from the lips of Jesus. Just ask someone what he or she thinks Jesus meant by these words and see what answers you get.

Excursus on: The Ephesian Books of Magic

Magic in Greco-Roman paganism was an art described as the manipulation of physical objects and cosmic forces, through the recitation of formulas and incantations by certain persons having secret knowledge that enabled them to access the otherworldly realms and thus obtain power or favors from the gods or demonic forces dwelling in that realm of existence. The magical texts are ritual texts designed to manipulate supernatural powers for the benefit of the magician or his or her client.

Because this was something done in secret for the benefit of an individual or within the context of a group, such as a guild or cult (i.e. a mystery cult), by means of their knowledge of magic found in these texts magic, was an art that was generally looked upon as illegitimate by official mainstream magical cults of the societies of the Greco-Roman world. Julius Caesar had forbidden the practice of magic and ordered all books of magic burned during his reign, but following his assassination, they soon reappeared.

There were various names given to those who practiced magic. The primary terms were *ho magon* (the great one), *pharmakeousi* (a sorcerer or worker of potions, our word for pharmacist), and some were called *phusikos* (the word for naturalist or scientist).

The Magical Scrolls

The Greek Magical Papyri is a collection of texts written in Greek on papyrus sheets, found in the deserts of Egypt in the last century.

The corpus that makes up the papyri was collected by the German scholar, Karl Preisendenz, and was published by him in two volumes in 1928 and 1931.

Many of the documents found are pages or fragments of pages from what may be called "spell books," which were repositories of esoteric knowledge and mystical secrets. The collection is in single pages in codex format (bound pages), rather than scrolls as we have with the Hebrew Scriptures and the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were written on animal skins call parchment. In content there are compilations of spells and magical writings gathered by individual parishioners, temple priests, and the mystery cults. Some may have been the manuals of traveling magicians, which contained their spells or formulas for various needs. These magicians run the range from low-life charlatans to the more respected Egyptian wizards, who were highly educated and made up the respected priestly elite.

The content of the *Magic Papyri* were spells, recipes for concoctions, formulae and prayers for healing, interspersed with magic words and names, which were believed to contain magical powers. The spells ran from the summoning of evil deities or demons to what may be called old wives tales and remedies, all believed to be capable of casting curses, love spells, and cures for various sicknesses.

Scholars are convinced that this collection reflects an elaborate syncretism of Greek, Egyptian, Babylonian, and even Jewish religious influences. Many terms found in the *Magical Papyri* were borrowed from the Mystery Religions or visa versa, suggesting that there were Mystery Cults that were one-and-the-same with Magic Cults.

The Ephesian Grammata

One of the finds of the *Magical Papyri* is "the *Ephesian Grammata*" (the Ephesian Writing), a collection of magical formulas dating back beyond the first century 100 BC. They contain chants of magical phrases, which were believed to be in an unknown tongue or glossolalia. The utterances were meaningless but were thought to

contained power when spoken correctly, the power resided in the sound of the utterances, so they were ineffective if mispronounced. Plutarch, a Greek historian, biographer, and essayist of the first Century AD, wrote that magicians were known to instruct the victims of demon possession to recite the unknown tongue of the *Ephesian Grammata* to dispell the demon.

Even though the meaning of the magical utterance was unknown, there were those who claimed to know the meaning and they attempted to exact silver for their interpretation of the utterance. This glossalilia was similar to what was practiced in Delphi at the Temple of Apollo with its famous "Oracle." The Oracle of Delphi was a female channel or *pythia* who would seat herself in the temple on a tripod above a fissure in the earth which emitted vapors or gasses. Going into a trance, she would utter a revelation in an unknown tongue, which remained unknown unless interpreted by one of the temple priests called a *hermaneutes* (interpreter) for an offering to the Temple of Hermes of silver or gold.

The Continuing Presence of the Otherworldly Powers of Paganism

There was always a continuing threat to the newly established house churches of an infiltration of the beliefs and practices of those converted from Greco-Roman paganism. An example of this reality may be seen in the church at Corinth. The Oracle of Delphi scenario mentioned above has something of a ring of what was going on in the church at Corinth that warranted Paul's instruction in 1 Cor 14:26-36. That something similar to what was practiced in Delphi may have infiltrated the church at Corinth is a very real possibility. This is especially possible in light of the fact that Delphi was less than ten miles north of Corinth.

Something out of the ordinary must have been going on to warrant Paul's instruction for the women to keep silence in the assemblies. This would seem to suggest that the "speaking" Paul had in mind involved more than speaking to one another in psalms,

hymns and spiritual songs, or praying, prophesying, or speaking in tongues, all of which were acceptable activities for both men and women, as is evident from the whole corpus of Paul's letters.

If Paul was giving an apostolic prohibition with universal application for all women to "be silent," in the assemblies of the church, then the women would have been forbidden to speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, which Paul instructed them to do in Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16. They would also have been forbidden to pray in the assemblies, which he instructed them to do, but only when having their heads covered (1 Cor 11:3-5). So also in 14:23, Paul speaks of the whole church speaking in tongues and prophesying (as did the two daughters of Philip in Acts 21:8-9).

Some scholars insist that Paul is inconsistent in his instruction here, but a better solution is possible. It is a very real possibility that Paul was suspicious of what was reported to him as going on in the assemblies at Corinth, that the women in question may have come in from the Mystery Cults or were trying to insert the Oracle of Delphi tradition into the worship of the Corinthian church, and Paul instructed the women in question to remain silent in order to bring matters under control until he could come there in person and better discern what was going on.

At any rate, there was a problem of keeping those converted to Christ from trying to merge their belief in Christ with their pagan beliefs. What was happening at Ephesus in the burning of their magical papyri is exemplary of full conversion to Christ. Those confessing Jesus as Lord fully realized that repentance of sin and their confession of Jesus as Lord, required a complete putting away of those activities that were associated with other sources of power in their lives. If they had confessed Jesus as Lord, then there was no room in their lives for otherworldly beings such as the gods and goddesses, demons and spirits of Greco-Roman mythology.

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individual or within the context of a group, such as a guild or cult (i.e. a mystery cult), with foreign methods these texts represent an art that was generally looked upon as illegitimate by official mainstream magical cults in societies ("*Magic in the Greco-Roman World*," <http://en.wikipedia.org>). There were various names given to these persons. The primary term was *ho magon* (the great one), *pharmakoi* (a sorcerer or worker of potions, our word for pharmacist), and some were called *phusikos* (the word for naturalist or scientist).

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from the Mystery Religions or visa versa, suggesting that there were Mystery Cults which were one-and-the-same with Magic Cults (cf. "*The Magical Papyri*" from <http://en.wikipedia.org>).

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