

The Threat of Christianity

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[0 : 00] Well, in the UK today, Christianity is considered to be dangerous, where Christians are often seen to be so narrow and exclusive that they are a threat to society.

! And so we're warned by the politicians and the media to be aware of radical Christianity. By radical, they actually mean biblical Christianity, because real Christianity, as opposed to the bland Christianity that merely apes the society, real Christianity isn't a threat.

It isn't a danger to our lives. And so does Christianity really pose the kind of threat that people think it does to our social order? Well, it doesn't.

But people often think real Christianity is so dangerous that we just can't tolerate it in our culture. We shouldn't have it taught in our schools. It should be silenced in our university campuses and even legislated against in hate speech and conversion practice laws.

And this kind of thinking has been gathering momentum for a number of years. Tim Farron, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats, said, If you actively hold a faith that is more than an expression of cultural identity, you're deemed to be far worse than eccentric. You're dangerous. You are offensive.

[1 : 33] But real Christianity has always been viewed as being radical. It has always been considered to be dangerous as a threat to society.

And the reason it's considered to be a threat is because Christianity actually challenges our lives and it challenges our society. And this is what we see happening in our reading from Acts chapter 19 as Paul goes to Ephesus with the Christian message, with the message of Jesus Christ. And so we're told in verse 23 that Christianity caused a great disturbance. And then verse 27 that it was a danger for the society because Christianity clashed with the culture of Ephesus at every single level.

It clashed with the personal lives of individual people, but it also clashed with the public life of the city of Ephesus. And that is the radical nature of Christianity. It challenges personal lives, yours and mine, but it also challenges public life.

Which means, of course, there is going to be some kind of social cost to being a Christian. If you're a Christian believer, you'll know this. And if you're here today and you're considering becoming a Christian, you'll probably sense that there is a cost to nailing your colours to the mast.

[3 : 04] And so this afternoon we're going to consider three points. First of all, how Christianity impacts personal life, how Christianity impacts public life, and how you get the power to live a radical life.

So first of all, how Christianity impacts personal life. We see this in verse 1 to 22. Because as Paul brought Christianity to Ephesus, it impacted everybody.

And we'll understand why when we consider the kind of place that Ephesus was. Ephesus was like any major city today, so similar to Glasgow.

It was a significant urban centre of the Roman Empire. It was important commercially because it had a port, and so trade came from all over the world, as did people.

And it was important religiously because Ephesus, we saw from our reading, was the home of the Temple of Artemis. And that temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

[4 : 09] And so the goddess Artemis was considered to be the guardian of the city of Ephesus. And she was portrayed on the coins. Her image was on there, a fertility goddess with many breasts.

And all kinds of festivals were held in her honour. And so the worship of Artemis was basically central to the life of the city. Ephesus derived its wealth and prestige from her temple, which was a massive tourist attraction.

And so when Paul brought the message of Jesus to Ephesus, then there was a clash. And yet, the space in Acts that's devoted to Paul's time in Ephesus is longer than anywhere else so far. Where his time was focused, you notice, on faithfully proclaiming the message of the Lord Jesus. There in verse 10, it's about the word of the Lord. Verse 17, the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour.

Verse 20, in this way, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. So Paul entered Ephesus with the word of the Lord, the message of Jesus Christ.

[5 : 26] And it changed the city. And there are three different responses to the message of Jesus in Ephesus. There is unbelief, there is misbelief, and there is belief.

So first of all, unbelief, verse 8 and 9. 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 went to the synagogue first, as usual.

He argued persuasively, as always. And he was met with stubborn unbelief, which is a common response to the message of Jesus.

So no matter how persuasively Jesus is presented, there will always be a refusal from some to believe. And it isn't that people don't get it.

[6 : 24] It is that they don't want it. Where the unbelief isn't a problem of the intellect, but it is actually a problem of the will. Not that people can't understand, but that they won't understand.

And it's important to get this. Especially if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian. Because perhaps you don't believe, because you're still exploring Christianity.

And you've got loads of questions that you're still trying to work through. And so church is the best place to be with an open mind and an open Bible to explore things further.

And that's an honest way of exploring Christianity. But there's a kind of unbelief that's stubborn. And no matter how persuasive the argument or how reasonable Christianity is, it makes absolutely no difference to some people.

Why? Because their minds are made up. Because they're obstinate. And they refuse point blank to believe. And perhaps that is you.

[7 : 32] Well, then be careful. Because this kind of unbelief is dangerous if it's closed to reason. And that's why we see it went a stage further in Ephesus.

Because those who refuse to believe, we read in verse 9, publicly maligned the way. Now the way is Christianity. So it wasn't just unbelief.

It was deliberately making Christianity out to be evil and dangerous. And yet it doesn't stop Paul. Paul continues on in Ephesus.

So he hires the lecture hall of Tyrannus, verse 9. 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.

So Paul went even more public with the message of Jesus when he was met by the unbelief. So there's unbelief. But secondly, there is also misbelief.

[8 : 33] What do I mean by misbelief? Well, you get this reaction in verse 11 to 16. So God is doing these extraordinary miracles through Paul.

Verse 11. And then some Jewish exorcists trying and copy this. So we read about the seven sons of Sceva who try to use the name of Jesus like it's some kind of magic power to help them cast out demons.

It's like a syncretism. And then verse 13. So that's misbelief.

That's misbelief. Trying to combine Jesus with their pagan rituals and practices. And yet it backfires big time.

Verse 15 tells us, One day the evil spirit answered them, Jesus I know and Paul I know about, but who are you? The evil spirit brings them down a peg or two.

[9 : 39] So the evil spirit knew Jesus, obviously, because they all did. Jesus had power over them. The evil spirit even knew Paul because of the miracles that God was doing through Paul.

But the seven sons of Sceva are nobodies. The evil spirit had never heard of them. And so they're beaten up. Verse 16. Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding. Now there is a beating and a beating. Like if you run out of the house and you're naked and you're bleeding, you never live that one down.

That is complete and utter humiliation. But the point is that Jesus is the ultimate power. Jesus can't be manipulated to suit us.

You can't combine Jesus with a twisted system of belief because it's misbelief. Because Jesus is Lord over all. And so we can't control Jesus.

[10:46] Jesus is the one who controls us. And yet still some misbelieve and reckon that they can bolt Jesus on as an extra to their lives.

Like using Jesus for our own personal benefit. Basically living our life in the way that we want to live. But having a bit of Jesus in the hope that, well, it will bring us good health.

Or a good job. Or a good income. Or a good partner. Or whatever it is. And perhaps you've used Jesus in this way. But the point here is, either Jesus is Lord of all over our lives.

Or he isn't Lord at all. So there's unbelief. And there's misbelief. And then thirdly, there's also belief. And that's the reaction in verse 17 to 20.

So while the seven sons of Sceva misused the name of Jesus, others believed. And we read that the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.

[11:54] Verse 17. When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear. And the name of 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 50,000 drachmas.

So the evidence of the belief is seen in the costly burning of all of these magic scrolls. Now it's thought in today's money, this would be around 4 million pounds.

And so the cost just shows how radical belief in Jesus was for the people of Ephesus. Because renouncing their sorcery and burning their scrolls was a sign of repentance.

Their lives were changed. They were turning away from an old way of life and to Jesus and a new way of life. And isn't that why real Christianity poses a threat to our personal lives?

[13:06] It's not dangerous because it's harmful to us. But it's dangerous because it involves a massive upheaval in our lives and the things that we do.

Because when Jesus is Lord, then it's bound to impact everything, isn't it? Changes have got to take place. And that's not a bad thing.

People always want to change for the good. And that's why somebody like Jordan Peterson is so popular these days. As a clinical psychologist, people always want to listen to what he's got to say about practically changing their lives.

And that's why his best-selling books, 12 Rules for Life, An Antidote to Chaos, and then Beyond Order, 12 More Rules for Life. That's what they're all about.

Because his solution is that we need a radical life. One that's different from the life and the lifestyle that our culture expects of us.

[14:10] And of course, a lot of what Jordan Peterson says is helpful. But the problem is he doesn't go far enough. Because Christianity produces a life that is far more radical than anything else.

It turns our lives upside down. Or better, it actually turns our lives the right way up. Christianity reorientates our lives and recalibrates our lives just like it did for the believers in Ephesus.

Belief in Jesus means radical transformation. Like turning away from our sinful habits and practices and changing our speech, what we say, how we say it.

It means putting right-wrong relationships. It means getting rid of books that we shouldn't read, music we shouldn't listen to, shows that we shouldn't watch.

It means putting filters on our computers and on our phones to stop feeding our minds with all kinds of harmful material. It means we have a different attitude to our work and to other people.

[15:23] It means we're less greedy and we're more generous with our money. It means we want to serve others rather than promote ourselves. Because belief in Jesus transforms us from the inside out.

As God the Holy Spirit dwells in us, then our desires change. And we want to get rid of everything that displeases God, just like the believers did in Ephesus.

See what happened to them again. Verse 20. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. The difference that Jesus made to the city.

So real Christianity shook up Ephesus. And real Christianity, when we believe it, shakes up our lives today. So that's the first point. How Christianity impacts personal life.

The second point is how Christianity impacts public life. And we see this in two ways here. First, Christianity provokes rage. And then secondly, Christianity presents reasonableness.

[16:29] So rage, first of all, that's verse 23 to 34. Because the rage against Christianity results in a riot in Ephesus.

Christianity disturbed the people. Why? Well, because the message of Jesus always confronts people. It always challenges the beliefs and the practices of every single culture.

Because it reveals our sin. It exposes our idols. And it challenges our lifestyles. And you see here how it all kicks off with a silversmith named Demetrius.

He stirred up the people. Claiming that Jesus was a danger to public life. And his business was making small replicas of the Temple of Artemis.

A bit like the tourist souvenirs that you might pick up when you go to London. Small trinkets of the Houses of Parliament. But of course, what Demetrius was making was less tacky.

[17:34] Because it was made of silver. And so this was big business for Demetrius. And it was good for the economy. And so he quotes Paul as saying, verse 26, that gods made by human hands are no gods at all.

And so when Christianity arrived in Ephesus, it challenged the idolatry of the culture. Demetrius claimed it was a danger to their trade and to their temple.

And so he takes the high moral ground warning of the economic loss. And then he appeals to the city's loyalty to Artemis. And his rage against Christianity actually flows from the pride and the greed in his own heart.

Because Christianity does challenge our wealth and the worship of our hearts. And it exposes what we love the most. So Christianity doesn't just disturb our personal lives.

It disturbs public life. Because it exposes what our culture is really like. What drives our culture. What matters most to people.

[18:50] What we truly love. You see, Christianity always upsets the status quo. It's a direct threat to the agreed practices and the societal norms around us.

And that's why our society can't cope with real Christianity. And often will rage whenever it is voiced.

It doesn't like to discover what our hearts are really attached to. How twisted and how misplaced our passions actually are.

And so the easiest way to avoid the threat of real Christianity is just simply to label it as dangerous and try and cancel it. And that's how Demetrius got the crowd on side.

But I doubt that the average Ephesian citizen really cared about silversmiths losing trade. Any more than people care about politicians losing their expenses or bankers losing their bonuses.

[19:53] But people do care when their false beliefs are exposed as absolute nonsense. And people do care when their foolish behavior is called out as being harmful and abusive.

That's when the rage inside boils up and eventually spills out. Often into completely irrational behavior. Which is what we see here.

Verse 28. When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theater together.

Now apparently the theater in Ephesus could hold over 20,000 people. Partic Thistle at Fir Hills got a capacity of 10,000. So double it.

And that's the kind of number that were there. And so Luke highlights the fury and the confusion of the world. And the confusion as well as the delusion of the people. Verse 32.

[21:01] The assembly was in confusion. Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. Then verse 34. But when they realized he was a Jew, they shouted in unison for about two hours, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!

The crowd was so large and so full of rage that it was dangerous. The people had completely lost the plot.

But of course, this kind of behavior isn't confined to Ephesus, is it? You still see this kind of rage against Christianity today. G.K. Chesterton summed it up well when he said, When we cease to worship God, we do not worship nothing.

We worship anything. And so people might not worship the goddess Artemis, But we will still worship other gods, false gods, in place of God.
Whether it be money or work or sex or power or success. These things will become more important to us than God himself. Anything that takes over our life becomes the god that we worship.
[22 : 13] Anything that becomes the thing we seek satisfaction from, Or devote our lives to, or put our trust in, becomes a false god. And so when Christianity challenges the culturally acceptable idols of public life in any culture, Then society rages against Christianity and rages against Christians.

It will not tolerate a Christianity that exposes the nonsense and depravity of our culture. The only option is to publicly malign it, as happened here in Ephesus.
Now of course, our society will always tolerate a false version of Christianity. The kind that stays inside church buildings, that doesn't enter into public life.
The kind that affirms our desires, whatever they may be. The kind of Christianity that simply apes the values of our culture. Nobody ever bothers with that kind of Christianity.
And yet all hell breaks loose when real Christianity confronts the idols that we worship. And so real Christianity in public life provokes rage.
[23 : 32] But also real Christianity also presents reasonableness. And that's in verse 35 to 41. So despite the disturbance, despite the danger, The text here also shows how reasonable it is to believe Christianity.

So Paul has reasonable discussions about the Christian faith in the public square. Paul's not the one who starts the riot. It's Demetrius who starts the riot and gets the mob to join in.
And then a city clerk comes along and he's sensible. Not that he's a believer, but he knew Christianity isn't dangerous. And it's not that he's defending the Christians.
As a city leader, he's probably more concerned that rioting doesn't happen on his watch. And so the point is that Christianity is never a danger to society.
The real danger to society comes from the liberal agenda. With its approved doctrine and its accepted practices, Which are then forced on everyone.
[24 : 43] With the propaganda that says, You must not think like this. You must affirm this. Or there's no place for you in our society.

And like Ephesus, there's a mob rule as the politicians, As the media and as the social commentators, All jump on the bandwagon of their own state religion.
And of course they wouldn't call it religion, But that's what it is. Because they demand that everybody be converted to their way of thinking. And their way of doing things.
And any dissenters must be cancelled or punished. And so they will rage when their ideologies are confronted and challenged by the people. And so Christianity isn't the danger to our lives or to our society.
Christianity is reasonable. It always has been. It enables our lives and our society to flourish. So thirdly and finally, How do you get the power to live a radical life?
[25 : 49] Well, how would you define radical these days? Radical is actually the normal Christian life. So like Ephesus, it's those who believe in Jesus today, Who are the radical people in our society.

See how radically counter-cultural it was for the believers in Ephesus to burn their old way of life. That was radical.
Because aping the culture, worshipping the culture's idols, adopting the culture's values, That's not radical. You're no different to the culture.
You're just a clone. The same as everybody else. It's interesting. Today, a life of expressive individualism, the you-do-you way of life, Isn't as radical as people assume that it is.
Because what our culture means when it says you-do-you is make sure you do it like me. Don't dare do a you that doesn't meet with our approval.
[27 : 00] Or we'll cancel you. Thou shalt not depart from the cultural agenda. You must worship the idols we've set up. You must bow down to them.

You must devote yourself to them. You must obey our doctrines. And that's hardly radical, is it? It's just going along with the flow. The same as everybody else.
Being swept up with what everybody else is doing, thinking, and how they're living. You're not radical if you break the Ten Commandments.

You're radical if you seek to keep them. Because the doctrine and practice our culture preaches is actually so conformist. So passy. So dull.

So boring. You can't be radical if you repeat the same mantras of our culture like a broken down record player. You're not saying anything special.

[27 : 56] Your social media posts don't stand out. There's nothing cool about them. They're the same as every other social media post that you'll just scroll through. And so do you want to know what's radical these days?

These days, being radical is believing in Jesus and following Him. Believing in Jesus and living for Him. That's the only radical thing left to do in public life today.

It's the only thing that clashes with culture, merely than simply conforms to the culture. So to be truly radical is actually to live the normal Christian life.

The life that God calls His people to. Which means repenting of our sin. Reading our Bible every day. Worshipping at church every Sunday.

Turning away from our cultural idols. Being radical is being faithful in your marriage. It's teaching your children about Jesus and helping them grow up in the Christian faith.

[29 : 02] Being radical is refusing to have sex outside of marriage. It is to behave with integrity in the workplace. Being radical is avoiding gossiping about other people.

It's about taking steps to control your anger, your lust, your spending. It's about generously and sacrificially investing your time and your talents and your treasures in God's life.

That's what's radical. Refusing to get addicted to alcohol, to drugs, pornography or gambling. That's radical. Believing that a woman is an adult human female.

That's a radical thing to say and to think. Believing that abortion is murder. That assisted suicide is killing. That's radical in today's world, isn't it?

And that's why Christianity is regarded as a threat. Because it always upsets the status quo. And you know that if you're a Christian. Your life will be a threat to the lives of the people around about you.

[30 : 05] Because being a Christian and living out the Christian faith will always confront the practices and the norms of this world. And yet our world needs more Christianity, not less.

Even if it doesn't realize it. And that's why we should never capitulate to the culture. But live radically counter-cultural lives. The lives that Jesus calls us to.

Radical lives. Radical because they're the normal Christian life. And yes, some will rage. N.T. Wright, the New Testament scholar says, Everywhere St. Paul went, there was a riot.

Everywhere I go, they serve tea. I wonder what it is for us. Wherever we go. Because there's always going to be opposition.

And yet we should never fear public opinion more than God. And so while some will rage against Christianity, others will actually come to see the reasonableness of the Christian faith.

[31 : 15] And it is happening today. And so how do you get the power to live this normal Christian life? Well, it is the only truly radical life that there is out there.

But how do you do it? Well, it's impossible to do it on our own. But there's one who has gone before us. And he has gone before us for us.

Jesus Christ lived the most radical life ever. And he constantly clashed with the culture. And yet he transformed lives as he brought the kingdom of God.

His life of loving, sacrificial service was so radical that he was willing to suffer and die on a cross for his enemies.

People like us. Jesus died for you and me. And so it's only when we put our faith and trust in him. And the son of God who radically loved us and gave himself for us.

[32 : 18] Does life make sense? And only when we trust in him and see what he has done. And believe in him and follow him. Only then will we go out into the world and live a radical life.

Let's pray together. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.