

CHRISTIANITY IS DANGEROUS

by Ray C. Stedman

A definition I find most descriptive is that a Christian is one who is:

Completely fearless,
Continually cheerful, and
Constantly in trouble.

Surely nothing could better describe the Apostle Paul in his ministry to the world of his day. He was -- by faith, not by nature -- completely fearless, continually cheerful, and certainly constantly in trouble. That is indicative of an inherent quality of Christian life. Christianity is a very dangerous faith. If you do not think so, you have not begun to live it. We are followers of one who said, "I have come not to bring peace on earth but a sword, and to make a division among men," {cf, Matt 10:34}. By that seemingly paradoxical means he purposes to heal the warring of earth, to repair the brokenness of mankind, and to join men into one great body, sharing life together.

When Paul came to Ephesus, as recorded in Acts 19, he found that city locked into pagan superstition, the people miserable and depraved, practicing black magic, voodoo, and other occult arts, ridden by fear, by demonism, by darkness, the sordid powers of evil entrenched in a stronghold over the city, holding it in bondage. Paul attacked that stronghold with the most powerful weapons ever known -- the weapons of truth, of love, of righteous behavior, and of faith expressed in prayer. Almost singlehandedly at first, before the little band of Christians gathered around him began to swell and to spread all through the province of Asia, he began to attack this formidable stronghold. And within two years it was demolished.

The result was that they had a great bonfire in Ephesus, to which the people brought their books on black magic and their astrological charts and horoscopes and Ouija boards and burned them in a public square in the center of the city. It looked as if Paul's work there were over, as if the Marines had landed and the situation were well in hand. So the apostle evidently began to think of moving on.

Luke tells us in Acts 19, Verses 21-22:

Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while. {Acts 19:21-22 RSV}

At this time there were three things which occupied the apostle's heart and moved him to take this action:

First there was that which he said weighed upon him daily: Care for the new Christians who had come to Christ in Macedonia and Greece -- in Thessalonica and Beroea and Philippi, in Athens and Corinth. He longed to impart more truth to them, for he knew, far better than we in our day seem to have remembered, that beginning the Christian life is not enough; you must learn how to live it in the power of the Holy Spirit. For if you begin the Christian life but do not learn how to live it, you will still have heaven as your home and God as your Father, and some joy and peace in your heart, but you will be ineffective as a Christian and your life will still reflect bondage to sin and the reign of evil, just as much as it did before you became a Christian. So he longed to teach them the truth which would set them free and make them vital, growing, attractive Christians.

The second thing that moved him was an intense desire to penetrate to the very center of the Roman empire and culture with the claims of Christ, to plant the gospel in the fullness of its power in the very capital, in Rome itself. "After I've been to Jerusalem," he said, "I must see Rome." Dr. G. Campbell Morgan says, "That's not the 'must' of the tourist; that's the 'must' of the missionary." He longed to help the Christians who were

already there and to instruct them. On the very journey which he will soon commence, when he comes to Corinth, he will take time to write his great epistle to these Roman Christians, so as to help them even though he is hindered from getting there. But he also determines that at last he will come to Rome.

The third thing, merely suggested here by Luke, is the concern and desire in his heart to help the famine-stricken saints of the church at Jerusalem. Already a great famine had descended upon the land of Judea. The Christians in Jerusalem were hungry, and Paul longed to help them. So he sent Timothy and Erastus into Macedonia. Here we are not told, but from one of Paul's letters we learn why: It was to tell the churches there about the need of the Christians in Jerusalem, and to collect an offering for them in advance, so that, when the apostle came, he could send it or take it to Jerusalem. We can read this in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 16:

Now concerning the contribution for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should also go, they will accompany me. {1 Cor 16:1-4 RSV}

He reminds these Corinthians,

I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may speed me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now just in passing; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. {1 Cor 16:5-9 RSV}

It was the apostle's plan to stay in Ephesus until the day of Pentecost, but his mind was soon changed. Luke tells us now, in Acts 19, what caused him to alter these plans:

About that time there arose no little stir concerning the Way. For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together, with the workmen of like occupation, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. And you see and hear that not only at Ephesus but almost throughout all Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable company of people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may count for nothing and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship." {Acts 19:23-27 RSV}

The silversmiths at Ephesus had been organized into a trade union. And they found that they were being hit hard in the most sensitive part of the human anatomy -- the pocketbook.

I heard a man say the other day that he saw a friend looking very gloomy. He asked his friend, "What's the matter?" The friend said, "My wife has just made me a millionaire." He said, "Well, what's wrong with that?" The friend answered, "I used to be a multi-millionaire." Anything that hits us in the financial area always strikes home.

These silversmiths, who made little silver souvenirs of the goddess Artemis, found their business tremendously diminished because so many people were becoming Christians that nobody wanted their shrines anymore. Demetrius, the president of the union, cared nothing for the real welfare of the hundreds who had become Christians and had found freedom and peace and joy in Christ. He saw only the red ink in the profit and loss columns of his books, and he was very concerned about that. (It is interesting that archaeologists have found in the ruins of Ephesus an inscription bearing the name of the man, Demetrius.) The problem, of course, was that the vested interests in Ephesus were being threatened.

This sounds very familiar in our day, does it not? We know that this is a charge many make concerning the war in Vietnam. They say the war is being continued simply because there are men in this country who have vested interests in making money by means of the military machine. If the war ended, their interest would be threatened, and that is why they keep it up. There is a certain degree of justification for this charge, because there always have been profiteers who care nothing for the fact that lives are lost, and bodies smashed and mutilated, so long as they make a fast buck.

This was the problem here in Ephesus. Profiteering is nothing new.

There is a profound revelation of mob psychology in the account Luke gives us. For, after all, you cannot arouse a mob to defend your interests if all you can say is that you haven't been making as much as you used to. That may interest you, but it does not interest others. They do not care whether you made any money or not. Yet the lack of revenue was what stirred up these silversmiths. They were disturbed by their loss of income. Since no one will defend you on that basis, Demetrius had to add another charge, emotionally loaded, deliberately introduced, in order to arouse the citizenry.

The charge was that the religion of the city was threatened, that Artemis, the goddess the city worshipped, was insulted by this loss of income and was in danger of losing her stature in the eyes of the world. Artemis was the goddess enshrined in the great temple outside Ephesus, which was known as one of the seven great wonders of the world. She was carved, apparently, from a meteorite, because, later on, the town clerk reminds them that this image had fallen from the sky. According to some of the copies that have been excavated, she was the figure of a many-breasted woman, enshrined as the goddess representing Mother. So, in attacking Artemis, they were attacking Mother.

When you attack Mother and apple pie, you are really striking to the heart of a deeply involved emotional issue. And these men knew it.

These riot engineers in Ephesus, and those of any other day, know exactly what emotional issues will arouse people. They well knew that they could stir up the whole city with this one, for this was the season of the year when Ephesus gave itself over to a whole month of feasting, revelry, and debauchery centering on the worship of Artemis. They called this festival the "Artemision." It had the characteristics of the Mardi Gras in New Orleans. The city was packed with people who had come for this special occasion.

There are two very interesting and revealing things about this speech by Demetrius:

First, he evidently was quite unaware how ridiculous his charge really sounds. If Artemis is so great that the whole world worships her, then why is she not able to defend herself against this attack? If her power is so great that she commands the worship of men, why does she need the support of the city of Ephesus to defend her? No one ever seems to face that kind of a question when raising an issue such as this.

Second, he was obviously blind to the significance of the way by which his trade had been ruined. It had not been openly attacked by Christians. Paul had never said a thing against the religion of Ephesus. He had never denounced the temple, and had in no way tried to attack this pagan superstition. In fact, the town clerk will openly admit that, "these were not blasphemers of the goddess, nor robbers of the temple."

Now, that is most interesting, because, you see, there was nothing negative about their approach. These early Christians did not go around faulting paganism; they simply introduced a positive new faith of such tremendous power and such fantastic reality that, when anyone experienced it, the old way of life was wiped out. The old was devitalized by the appearance of the new, and there was no need for attack. The Christians simply declared Jesus Christ and his availability to man. And men and women, sunken in darkness and superstition, gripped by fear, found him so loving, so genuine, so joyful, that all their empty paganism simply was lost by comparison. It never seems to have dawned upon Demetrius that this was what had happened and that therefore there was no possible way of defending against it. If the Christians had attacked this pagan philosophy, then a defense could have been erected, but they said nothing about it. It was simply "the expulsive power of a new affection," to use Thomas Chalmers's marvelous term.

Luke continues his account of the mob and its actions in Verse 28:

When they heard this they were enraged, and cried out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" So the city was filled with the confusion; and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. Paul wished to go in among the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; some of the Asiarchs also, who were friends of his, sent to him and begged him not to venture into the theater. Now some cried one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. {Acts 19:28-32 RSV}

That sounds familiar, does it not? How little human nature has changed in two thousand years! Here was a crowd, excited by a false emotional issue, which surged together into the theater. If you visit the site of Ephesus today you find that this theater has been excavated. It is the only sizable part of the city which still stands. It was a huge theater, able to seat about twenty thousand people, so this was a vast crowd. These people were very responsive to this appeal, although there were many who did not know what it was all about.

Paul wanted to go in and speak to them. What an insight into the fearless bravery of this man of God, who did not hesitate a moment to take on a crowd like this. But his friends recognized that the mood of the crowd was ugly. Even the Asiarchs, the political rulers of the province of Asia, responsible to the Romans, who were friends of Paul, were concerned and sent word to him not to venture into the theater. That is very revealing. Paul had made friends among these rulers. They understood and were impressed by the message of Christ. Though Luke does not say they were Christians, nevertheless they were favorably inclined and tried to protect Paul from this wild and raging mob.

Luke then goes on to show how impossible it would have been for Paul to have done anything to quiet them:

Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander motioned with his hand, wishing to make a defense to the people. But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all with one voice cried out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" {Acts 19:33-34 RSV}

Again that sounds familiar. Here is a wild mob that has no argument other than simply to chant, over and over again, this slogan which aroused their pride and fed their egos and ministered to their emotions. The Jews were very concerned, doubtless because they had lived in this city for many years and were known to be opposed to the worship of idols. They had a synagogue there and had made it clear that they were not idol worshipers and did not approve the practice, but they had no effect upon the populace. They stood for the right cause, but without any power to affect others. Nevertheless they were afraid that they might be implicated in this disturbance and so they prompted Alexander, one of their number, to stand up and explain their attitude and to make clear that they were not the ones who had prompted the riot.

This very likely is the same Alexander to whom Paul refers in his letter to Timothy, who had become, by the time Paul wrote, the bishop of the church at Ephesus. Paul said, "Beware of Alexander the coppersmith who did me great harm," {cf, 2 Tim 4:14}.

I remember, years ago, hearing a Baptist preacher comment on that text. He said that he, too, had been damaged by Alexander the coppersmith, as he looked at the collection plate and saw all the pennies there!

But the crowd refuses to hear Alexander and drowns out his words with a chant they continue for more than two hours, over and over, monotonously again and again, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

All you have to do is substitute, "Ho, ho, Ho Chi Minh!" and you have brought that right up to date. When a crowd gets to the point where its emotions have been so short-circuited that its reasoning power is lost, it is in a very dangerous state. These Asiarchs were quite correct in their concern for the apostle because, with just the slightest suggestion, this crowd could have been sent raging through the streets, demolishing everything in its path. But it was finally quieted by the town clerk, whose office in those Greek cities corresponded to that of mayor.

Luke tells us what happened:

And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus, what man is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky? Seeing then that these things cannot be contradicted, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against any one, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls; let them bring charges against one another. But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. For we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, there being no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." And when he had said this, he dismissed the assembly. {Acts 19:35-41 RSV}

This town clerk, whose name is not given to us, is an admirable politician and orator. He intervenes at precisely the right psychological moment. The crowd, having exhausted itself with its senseless roaring of the slogan for two hours now, is ready to listen at last. So he stands up to speak, setting forth three logical points. (His first name was probably Spiro.)

These were his points:

1. "Yes, Artemis is great; therefore there is no need to shout. We can count on her to defend herself, so why worry? Nobody is going to be able to overthrow a goddess as great as ours, so we don't need all this commotion.
2. "The men that you are charging have really done nothing provocative. They have not blasphemed the goddess; no such charge has been brought against them. They have not robbed the temple, nor been sacrilegious in any way; therefore why handle this matter any differently than through ordinary channels? The courts are open, and if that doesn't satisfy you, the legislature is available. The normal channels of protest are open to you, so why don't you use them? And
3. "We are seriously in danger of losing the freedom of this city as a result of this indiscretion." For he well knew that the Romans would tolerate anything except civil disorder. If an unexplained riot occurred they were in danger of losing their status as a free city, unencumbered by Roman rule.

This is the telling point. You can see that this town clerk has nothing more in mind than that which would normally concern a politician -- keeping the peace. He really does not care about the issues. He does not want to examine them. He wants only to keep everything orderly. So he puts a suppressing hand upon the unruliness. Now, that is the way men think. But, in that, God was overruling the wildness of this mob, calming the emotional passions which were surging in the hearts of so many people and were creating this uncontrollable situation. God quieted all this through the use of governmental channels.

In the opening verse of Chapter 20, after another of these unbelievably misplaced chapter divisions, you have the final sentence of this story:

After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples and having exhorted them took leave of them and departed for Macedonia. {Acts 20:1 RSV}

Paul is anxious to explain this whole affair to the Christians. There is something about it he does not want them to miss, so he calls them together and exhorts them before he leaves. Luke does not tell us what that exhortation consisted of, but I believe that Paul does. There is a passage in his second letter to the Corinthians which refers to this very occasion. If you turn to Second Corinthians 1:8, you will see what I mean. Some scholars doubt it, but in my judgment this is clearly a reference to this very occasion. Paul says,

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. {2 Cor

1:8 RSV}

Put yourself back with the apostle into the midst of this tremendous uproar. It was a very threatening circumstance. It had appeared for awhile that the gospel had so triumphed in Ephesus that Paul could think of leaving and going on to other places. Then this riot suddenly occurred, seeming to threaten the entire cause of Christ, and putting the Christians in great jeopardy and danger. Paul is crushed and very distressed. In fact, he says his very life is in danger. This crowd is so wild, so uncontrollable that for a few hours it looks as though they might just sweep through the city and wipe out every Christian in Ephesus. Paul expresses it in these terms:

... we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; {2 Cor 1:8b-9a RSV}

He could not see any way out. It looked as if he had reached the end of the road.

... but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; {2 Cor 1:9b RSV}

You see, that is the very heart of the Christian message, as Paul will go on to explain in this letter. "Our sufficiency is not of ourselves," he says {cf, 2 Cor 3:5}. "It is not as though anything is coming from us; our sufficiency is from God. God alone is able. God without anything else, without any reckoning on any human resources, is able." And his explanation to these young converts in Ephesus was unquestionably along this line. He was saying to them, "God has sent this event, has allowed it to happen, in order to teach us that he is able to handle things when they get far beyond any human control. When our circumstances get way out of order, far beyond the resources to which we ordinarily look, God is able. And he has taught us this so that we will not rely on ourselves but upon him who raises the dead, who works in us to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we could ask or think, according to the power at work within us. He goes on to refer to this deliverance:

... he delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us in answer to many prayers. {2 Cor 1:10-11 RSV}

What an awareness this apostle had of the fantastic strength of the body of Christ working together, praying together, supporting one another, upholding each other in prayer and thus calling into action the mighty power of the God of resurrection, who can work through the most unexpected instruments to quiet a situation, to hold a crowd in restraint, to stop the surging emotionalism of people whose reasoning has been short-circuited, to hold them within limits and bounds, and to bring the whole affair to nothing! This is the might of our God.

This is what Paul particularly wants us to learn from this very situation, as we too come into times of danger and pressure and trouble. The difficulties which strike suddenly in our lives, the pressures through which we must go, the sudden catastrophes that come roaring in unexpectedly out of the blue -- these are sent in order that we might rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

So Paul sent for the disciples and having exhorted them he took leave of them and departed for Macedonia.

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