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Daily Bible Study

Introducing 1 Timothy

Ephesus, a key seaport for Asia Minor, was a swinging commercial center. Without an army, it maintained its place in the world through deal-making. It was the crowded home of about 350,000 people.

Dominating the economy of Ephesus was the temple of Artemis, "goddess of the Ephesians." It was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. A huge structure of solid marble, it was the largest temple in the world outside Egypt, and the biggest *bank* east of Rome! You can read in Acts 19 about the riot Paul's preaching triggered among the guilds that depended on temple business. Artemis herself was a 37-breasted fertility goddess who stood for bringing prosperity out of constant change.

And change there was.

Various cultures mixed in Ephesus. Its heritage was Greek, but Romans pushed in when it became part of the Empire. A sizeable Jewish community took root, as well as smaller communities of many ethnic groups. Different religions, philosophies and ethics coexisted while everybody sought some piece of the economic action.

Sports were a major entertainment. The Greeks had two gymnasia built for athletic contests, while the Romans built a stadium for gladiator combat. By the mid-second century, the Roman approach of spectacular violence won the day over the Greek ideal of simple competition.

Sex was also big business. Art depicting various sex acts adorned the garden walls of large villas. Bestiality and homosexuality were celebrated. The Romans built baths—a kind of ancient country club where the upper-class members of both sexes went nude. Prostitution, divorce, multiple marriages, abandoned children and neglect of the elderly were common. Religious opinion ranged from advocating deviant sex to shunning sex totally.

A confusing mix of religions existed in the shadow of the dominant Artemis. The large Jewish community coexisted with it. Smaller ethnic groups had their own religions but didn't seek prominence. The Romans argued the case to rename Artemis as Diana, while thinking Greeks argued over mystical experiences and whether the names of gods were just diverse labels for the "One Prime Mover."

Although Artemis ruled in the public square, magic influenced the personal lives of most people and invaded all of the formal religions. A striking

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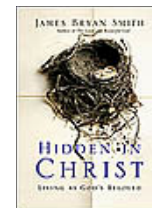
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example is the account in Acts 19:13-17, which involved even the family of the Jewish high priest. In magic, the Ephesian spirit of deal-making was applied to spirituality. Ephesian magic became famous throughout the Roman world.

Paul, for his part, saw Ephesus as a great place to preach the gospel. He began with preaching to his fellow Jews on his second missionary journey. On his third journey, he invested two solid years evangelizing and developing Christian leaders. Christian faith became so popular that the magic trade and temple business fell sharply.

Paul's farewell message (Acts 20), however, shows that he was bracing for a spiritual counterattack on the Christian community. He predicted even some of his converts would set themselves up as Christian "gurus" and carve out followings around their own blend of Scripture, the gospel and mystical teachings. The issue Paul saw as crucial was spiritual authority: When should we accept spiritual teachings? When should we reject them? How do we know if Christian teachers are trustworthy? This, in fact, was just the situation when Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy.

Paul had turned over the leadership of the church in Ephesus, the most strategic in Asia Minor, to Timothy, a bright, sensitive associate. Timothy was about forty years old at that time, which was considered young for such leadership. False teaching was coming from people within the church. Since some of these were leaders (see Acts 20:20), Paul could not write to the church at Ephesus directly, but instead went through Timothy whom he had confidence in. (Gordon Fee, "Issues in Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Crux* 26, no. 4 [December 1990].) Timothy's mission was to deal with false teaching, and it seems he was a capable teacher.

From references in 1 and 2 Corinthians, Acts, and the letters to Timothy, we know Timothy was a committed, but very human, person with some insecurities. Hebrews 13:23 shows that he spent some time in prison for his faith. We don't know what finally happened to Timothy, but we do know that John became the leader of the church not too long after these letters were written.

In these letters we can see Paul coaching the younger leader. In the process he raises issues which bear on us all—leaders or not.

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