

What Does Christianity Disrupt?

Acts 19:18-20, 23-41

“This Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods” (Acts 19:26).

Suppose the Concord Monitor ran an article tomorrow reporting that 6 million dollars worth of personally-owned merchandise had been burned by its owners—and that the reason was that the owners had become Christians. We would expect this to raise a lot of questions about what Christianity is all about—and what made it so disruptive. Is Christianity against business? against reason? against culture?

A similar scenario is recorded in Acts 19 as taking place in Ephesus: freshly-converted Christians burned their books of “magic arts” worth a total of fifty-thousand pieces of silver, and not long afterwards, a riot broke out among Ephesian businessmen in connection with the Christian faith.

Luke recorded these incidents to help his readers sort through what Christianity was out to disrupt, and what it was *not* out to disrupt. At the heart of the issue was something that the rioters *did* correctly understand about Christianity: It taught that “gods made with hands are not gods” (Acts 19:26). The gospel presents us with the truth about the one true God revealed in Jesus Christ, who rescues us from our self-destructive allegiance to things that are not gods.

1. What Christianity does *not* disrupt.

Luke records the Ephesian riot and its aftermath to show that the real instigators of the tumult were not the Christians, but the businessmen whose idol-making industry was under threat.

Christianity is not anti-business. Paul himself was a tradesman, as Luke points out in 18:1-4. Other passages of Scripture elevate the dignity of work (Luke 3:10-18; Ecclesiastes 2:24), and present God himself as a worker (Genesis 2:2).

Christianity is not anti-reason. Luke is concerned to show his readers the irrational nature of the riot: “The assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together” (19:32). In contrast to this mindless frenzy, the approach of the Christian missionaries was to “reason” and “dialogue” in appointed assembly areas (19:8-9).

Christianity is not anti-culture. In calming the riot, the city clerk stressed that the Christians couldn’t even be charged with being sacrilegious or blasphemers of their goddess (19:37). The word “sacrilegious” refers to the practice of robbing temples. The Christians’ strategy, in other words, was not to vandalize the pagan objects of veneration. In other passages of Scripture, we read that Paul was willing to adapt to various cultures in order to more effectively communicate the gospel: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

2. What Christianity *does* disrupt.

Clearly, the disruption must be explained somehow. If Christianity is not against these things, then what is it against? The answer is found in the Christian claim that Jesus alone is Lord. Only he is God; therefore, “gods made with hands are not gods” (19:26). Christianity disrupts our allegiance to things that are not really gods—things we *think* can save us but which actually

destroy us. But we find these false allegiances (idols) infecting every aspect of life, including reason, business, and culture, but so much more.

3. How Christianity restores what it disrupts.

But the Christian message also has the power to heal what it disrupts. When we trust in Christ, we are detached from false hopes; but we are also secured to the one true source of salvation. Then everything else can begin to be set right, too. Work, culture, and reason (and every other sphere of life), instead of becoming their own ends, now point to the true *end*—the glory of God.

Discussion Questions

1. Christianity is not anti-business, but some businesses are intrinsically anti-Christian. For example, the idol-making industry of 1st-century Ephesus and the claim that “Jesus is Lord,” are fundamentally at odds. How can we tell the difference between industries in our day that are fundamentally at odds with Christianity, and the others that need to be restored?
2. Much of the work we do doesn’t have the visibility of easily-recognizable careers. Some people stay at home to care for children or aging parents. Others are unemployed and looking for work. Still others have illnesses that keep them from working for profit. Does allegiance to Christ affect these vocations as well? If so, how?
3. An idol is something that demands our love, trust, and obedience. How might we detect idols in our lives?
4. Take a common contemporary “idol” (say, money, sex, or popularity) and evaluate it in terms of the promises and demands it makes. How does Jesus’ promises and demands compare?