

Engaging the Culture with Respect

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Acts

In the latter half of Acts, Paul, his companions, and various Christian communities come into conflict with those who wield local economic and civic power. After run-ins with the men and women of Antioch, Iconium, Philippi, and Thessalonica, Paul comes into conflict with the silversmiths' guild of Ephesians. The conflicts culminate with Paul's trial for disturbing the peace in Jerusalem, which occupies the final eight chapters of Acts.

The Artemis cult in Ephesus was a powerful economic force in Asia Minor. Pilgrims streamed to the temple (a structure so grand that it was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world) in hopes of receiving from Artemis enhanced fertility in the hunt, in the field, or in the family. In this context, as with other tourism centers, many of the local industries were tied to the ongoing relevance of the attraction.

A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, gathers together workers of the same trade and accuses Paul of drawing away their customers. Demetrius whips the artisans into a frenzy and the

whole city is filled with confusion, as a large crowd drags Paul's traveling companions to the theatre.

As Demetrius recognizes, when people become followers of Jesus, the way they use their money changes. Ceasing to buy items related to idol worship is merely the most obvious change. Christians might also be expected to spend less on luxury items for themselves and more on necessities for the benefit of others. Perhaps they will consume less and donate or invest more in general. There is nothing prohibiting Christians from buying silver items in general. But Demetrius is right to see that patterns of consumption will change if many people start believing in Jesus. This will always be threatening to those profiting most from the way things were before.

Although Demetrius tries to force the Christians into a direct confrontation, confrontation is not always the best way for the Christian community to engage the world. Often, the culture is misguided, struggling, or ignorant of God's grace, but not actually oppressive. In these cases, the best way to proclaim the gospel may be to cooperate with the culture and engage it with respect.

In Acts 17, Paul provides a model for us in how to engage the culture respectfully. It begins with observation. Paul strolls the streets of Athens and observes the temple of the various gods he finds there. He reports that

he “looked carefully” at the “objects of worship” he found there, which he notes were “formed by the art and imagination” of people (Acts 17:22, 29). He reads their literature, knows it well enough to quote, and treats it respectfully enough to incorporate it into his preaching about Christ. In fact, it even contains some of God’s truth, Paul says, for he quotes it as saying, “As even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring’” (Acts 17:28). A commitment to the radical transformation of society does not mean that Christians have to oppose everything about society. Society is not so much totally godless, God-unaware.

In a similar way, we need to be observant. When we see sin or brokenness in our workplaces, our purpose is not to judge but to heal. Paul is particularly observant of the sin and distortion of idolatry. “He was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” (Acts 17:16).

At the same time, we can find many good practices in our workplaces even though they do not arise from Christians. If we are truly observant, we see that even those unaware or scornful of Christ are nonetheless made in the image of God. Like Paul, we should cooperate with them, rather than try to discredit them. We should make use of their skills and insights, with the goal of showing how it proves that God “is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27). It is the difference between saying, “Because you don’t know

Christ, all your work is wrong,” and “Because I know Christ, I think I can appreciate your work even more than you do.”

Our careful observations, like Paul's, make us more astute witnesses of Christ's unique power to set things right. Meanwhile, our respectful engagement with the culture around us makes us more adept at connecting with those who don't yet know—and most have a need for —Christ.