

WHEN CHRISTIANS UPSET OTHER PEOPLE

The title of my sermon is: When Christians upset other people. When you hear this you might think, 'oh, oh, what have we done now? Whom have we upset?' Relax, this sermon is not about causing the kind of trouble that discredits Christ. No, the sermon is about Christians doing the things of God in society, which upset non-Christians. We're going to talk about Christian influence that disturbs non-Christians.

1. Its origin is from God.

When you read through the book of Acts then you notice that the apostles did things they had learnt from Jesus. They taught the Gospel and lived the Christian life, and that changed some people in a big way but it also upset other people in a big way. Acts speaks about people repenting and believing and the church growing in the knowledge and love of Christ and increasing in numbers. At the same time these early Christians were persecuted and marginalised by those who vigorously opposed the ways of God. This was God's doing. God causes His people to have an affect on society because God wants His name and truth honoured by all men and to have them know about salvation in Christ. He wants people to hear about their need for God, to repent and believe, and forsake their idols. But some don't like this. A Christian influence upsets them because it interferes with their way of life.

Let's look at an example of this. Paul had come to Ephesus. As was his custom he went to the Jewish synagogue first. There he explained that Jesus is the Christ and arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God [19:8]. After doing this for three months some people had become Christians but others finally had enough. They refused to believe and publicly ridiculed the Christian Way. So Paul had to stop meeting at the synagogue and he and fellow believers were able to use the nearby lecture hall of Tyrannus where they had discussions daily. This went on for two years and it resulted in all the Jews and Greeks living in and around Ephesus hearing the word of the Lord. At that time God did extraordinary miracles through Paul. People were cured of their illnesses and evil spirits were driven out of the possessed. But then some people decided they wanted a piece of the action and tried to copy what Paul was doing. They said to poor victims of demon possession, "*In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.*" It didn't work and one day it even backfired. A man with an evil spirit attacked them and gave them such a beating that they were forced to flee with their clothes torn of their back and bleeding from injuries.

When people heard about this they were seized with fear. It was plain that this Lord Jesus whom Paul was preaching wont stand for any nonsense. It resulted in even more people holding the name of the Lord Jesus in high honour. Many of those who believed came forward and openly confessed their evil deeds. Some who were involved in sorcery publicly burnt all their books and pamphlets. That kind of literature had cost a lot of money but it all went up in smoke and they weren't buying anymore. That would have hurt those that spread that evil rubbish. With all these things happening "*the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power*" [19:20].

But then something else happened. Verse 23 says, "*About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way.*" The 'Way' referred to what Christians believed and how they lived. As the church increased in numbers and its influence spread, the devil decided it was time to act.

2. Non-Christians react when Christian influence affects their lifestyle.

Our text is very brief. It just says, "*Soon the whole city was in an uproar.*" Another translation has "*The whole city was filled with confusion.*" It's saying that Ephesus was thrown into turmoil. Like water fills up a sponge so also was the city filling up with anger against Christians.

It all started when Demetrius realised he had a problem. Demetrius was a local business man. His company produced small silver statues of the goddess Diana, who was also known as Artemis. There was a temple of Diana in the town's centre and regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Inside the temple was a large statue of Diana. She was a fertility goddess, which was indicated by multiple breasts on the statue. The Christians in Ephesus would have said that it was revolting. Not only the statue but also the whole religion associated with it. Diana's followers believed that when you worshipped the goddess, and the men made use of the temple prostitutes, then you would prosper and life would go well for you. It resulted in many pilgrims flocking to Diana's temple and becoming involved. It was a religion about sex and success. Not unlike Hollywood today. Many aspiring actors and actresses think this formula will get you to the top. It must be the

same for the fashion industry, judging from what is shown on television news every now and then. The world likes its sex goddesses.

Now Demetrius was a silversmith with a keen mind for business. People couldn't worship at Diana's temple all the time but they could be persuaded to buy little statues of Diana to have in their home and thus continue their devotion to the goddess. Demetrius was doing a roaring trade. He had a few people working for him and with the money earned they could buy other things that the town offered, which meant that the religion of Diana was good for the local economy.

But there was a fly in the ointment. Demetrius was quick to see that Christians could undo his profitable business. The gospel of Christ had made Christians realise that everything associated with Diana was false and dishonouring God. They turned away from the whole thing and stopped spending money on anything associated with it. Demetrius realised that his sales had started to slump from the time that stranger Paul had come to Ephesus and had filled the town with his teaching about Jesus.

Demetrius decided to take action. But he had to carefully work out what action would likely succeed most because many people were impressed with the teaching about Jesus. Demetrius had to be clever. He must first of all get the people to see that Christians were saying that Diana was not a god. He would have to remind people that the worship of Diana was a noble thing. Then secondly, Demetrius also figured that many people wouldn't want to lose this religion of sex and success, especially the men. And then thirdly, he would point out the obvious, his workers would stand to lose money if the trade of making little idols of Diana fizzled out. So Demetrius reacted to Christian influence doctrinally, ethically and economically. In other words, Demetrius made it clear that what these Christians are teaching goes against the very heart of the Diana religion, it will take away the pleasures of their religion, and it will mean loss of income.

When the workers heard all what Demetrius had to say they became furious. For two hours there were shouting, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians." They rioted. They grabbed some Christians and dragged them into the arena. Paul wanted to go there, speak to the crowd and rescue his fellow Christians. But his friends stopped him, the rioters would kill him. Many people in the arena did not even know why there were there. People were shouting different slogans. The town clerk had to come. He finally brought the crowd under control and told them to go home. He explained that the Christians had not done anything illegal, so if Demetrius and his mob wanted to take action then they should use the courts. But rioting will only bring the Roman soldiers and then they will all be in trouble. So the sovereign God protected His church in Ephesus.

But what must speak to us right now is that Christians have an affect on other people around them. In Ephesus that became very obvious. And that raises a question: Why were there so many riots against Christians back then in the time of the New Testament and why so few in our society? Well, people like Demetrius don't riot if business is good. And when Christians are not really all that different from the rest of society and support people like Demetrius then there is no reason for the devil to incite modern Demetriuses to take action. If those who follow Jesus keep on buying from Demetrius then why should he turn against them? In Paul's day, the new Christians became very different from the non-Christians around them, and Demetrius' income went down as a result. But in our society, many church people are as likely as anyone else to buy from Demetrius.

Let's spell that out a bit further. If Demetrius is a film producer who pumps out questionable shows, does he worry about losing money because of Christians? Not likely. Demetrius the film producer will continue with films filled with sex, graphic violence and foul language, because many people who say they are Christian are almost as likely as non-Christians to buy cinema tickets, rent his videos and DVD's, and watch his television shows.

If Demetrius owns a music company that produces godless, immoral, pagan songs, then he can count on teenagers from Christian homes to also buy and listen to his garbage. So many other teenagers are doing it, why be different from your peers.

If Demetrius runs a lottery and a casino, why would he want to start a riot against church people when quite a few of them support his business? The Bible warns against gambling. It is a sin. But among the followers of Jesus are some who have no scruples about trying their luck in getting rich quickly. Materialism is their god and that religion requires money, lots of it.

If Demetrius owns a brewery and a number of liquor outlets, why would he want to become upset about Christians when so many of them support his business with their buying of beer and wines at almost the same rate as those who do not follow Jesus? The Bible has strong words against getting drunk and society suffers a

great deal from liquor-related road accidents and illnesses but it doesn't seem to carry much weight with a number of people associated with the church. Many feel you can't have much fun and relaxation without having a beer in your hand all the time or a constant sipping from a wineglass.

If Demetrius is a drug pusher then he won't run down Christians too much because a number of their kids support him when they too try drugs and risk becoming addicted. No, the Demetrius running an illegal drug trade will be careful not to give off at Christians.

If Demetrius is in the tobacco industry then he can count on many Christians spending up to \$50 and over a week on buying cigarettes. They all know now what they didn't know many years ago, that smoking is a health hazard and it's costing the economy millions of dollars to treat related illnesses. But Demetrius' tobacco industry is doing nicely just the same. Thanks also to a good number of Christians.

If Demetrius manages a shopping mall, would he consider closing on Sundays because he is just not getting enough people to come in and shop on that day? Not so far. Among his clients are Christians who no longer take the Lord's Day all that serious. They argue that in our modern society it's impossible to keep the Lord's Day holy in the way it used to be done. Life is just too busy during the week, especially if you're on shift work, or work six days of the week. Many businesses keep on going seven days a week because society does not stop on Sundays anymore. Especially the fast-food outlets and among their patrons are also church people. A modern-day Demetrius realises that and it profits him if he continues to be nice to Christians.

Demetrius has also realised that more and more Christians are getting involved in Sunday sport. They don't seem to object anymore to playing games on Sundays, or be spectators, or watching sport on television on Sundays. Demetrius can advertise Sunday sports in his newspapers. He can sell food and drink at sports ovals on Sundays, and he can advertise his products on Sunday television sports programs. Nobody seems to mind. All days have become alike, and Demetrius loves it. It's good for business.

If Demetrius is in politics then he will not mind Christianity as long as it does not interfere with his political agenda. If he can win the Christians' vote then he will be careful not to upset them. But if Christians were to really become vocal about God's commandments having to have a say in the way the nation is run, then Demetrius is quite prepared to turn his guns on Christians and ridicule them without mercy.

If Demetrius is running a few abortion clinics and Christians are making life difficult for him by trying to introduce legislation that will put him out of business, then watch out. He will cry foul and insist that religion and politics should not mix. People can be Christian as long as they keep it private.

If Demetrius' name is Packer or Murdoch, then again he will not publish too many critical things against Christians as long as they keep buying his tabloid papers and weekly gossip papers with their lurid pictures and stories about sex and violence.

And if Demetrius belongs to a non-Christian religion, or has no religion at all, then he won't mind Christians who keep their faith to themselves. But if Christians call on others to turn away from the world's idols and stop doing things that dishonour God, if they begin to spell out what is sin and persuade people to turn away from worldliness and begin trusting in Jesus Christ, then Demetrius will be quick to denounce Christians as bigots and Bible-bashers. He will make it clear that Christians have no right to say that Christ is the only Saviour and that all other religions are false. A tolerant and decaying brand of Christianity upsets nobody, it fits right in with the world's way of doing things. But watch out if the Christian faith becomes a living, vibrant force in society.

We have spent a few moments looking at how non-Christians will react when Christian influence affects their lives and businesses.

3. Christians are God-pleasers, not people-pleasers.

It was very important for those Christians in Ephesus to stay focussed on following Jesus. People like Demetrius and his mob can be quite frightening and therefore it is all the more necessary to stay in contact with the Lord Jesus and keep in touch with God's Word. People who see Christians and Christian influence as a threat will spread all kinds of rumours, and that's all the more reason to remember that you belong to Christ and that He is your Lord. The early Christians were rumoured to be cannibals because they ate the body of Jesus and drank His blood at their Lord's Suppers. They were accused of sexual immorality because they came together for their love-feasts, which were just Christian fellowship meals. They were persecuted because someone spread the lie they had set Rome on fire. They were accused of treason because they didn't worship Caesar. But Christians

were simply followers of Jesus and unintentionally caused a disturbance when others were attracted to their godly way of living and heard from these Christians about God's wonderful grace and forgiveness in Christ.

So, if you are a Christian worth your salt, if you show your true colours, then some people will despise you and oppose you. But even so you do not want to be a people-pleaser but a God-pleaser. You have not many masters who tell you how to live, but one Master, and His name is Jesus Christ. The uproar the Christians caused in Ephesus and Christians upsetting other people today is nothing unusual. Jesus said, "*If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you . . . If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also*" [Jn.15:18-20].

A faithful and obedient Christian lifestyle will unavoidably cause a reaction from non-Christians when this begins to affect their business and lifestyle. As it did in Ephesus. Modern Demetriuses will soon let you know when they feel the influence of Christianity is hurting their interests. But when you and I offer a kind of Christianity that is so weak or so much like the world that non-Christians don't feel the need to oppose it, then it's not worth joining by those who seek the living God. A gospel that never turns anybody off will probably not turn anyone on either. The kind of Christianity that waters down the reality of salvation in Jesus and the new lifestyle that comes from His Holy Spirit and the Bible, is called a lukewarm Christianity.

Christ warned the church in Laodecia about this. He said, "*I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other. So, because you are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of my mouth*" [Rev.3: 15, 16]. The water supply to Laodecia came from distant springs. As it flowed to the town through pipes the water became lukewarm and barely drinkable. By contrast a neighbouring town had hot springs and its water had healing qualities and another neighbouring town got its water from a cold mountain stream. So Christ said to the Laodecian Christians - either be like that hot spring that has medicinal value, or be like that cold stream which is refreshing. But don't remain lukewarm.

Why does the Lord rebuke and discipline His church? Because He loves her. After the uproar in Ephesus had ended, the apostle Paul called the church together and encouraged them [Acts 20:1]. He would not have told the church to blend in more with society and let sleeping dogs lie. No, the people in town had heard of Christ through the life and witness of the Christians. That is a good thing because more sinners might come to repentance and faith in Christ. And when Christians know they are living close to Christ and are a salt and a light then they feel good about it. It means that they are what the Lord wants them to be.

Jesus keeps on telling us that He will fill us with joy when we live out the gospel. We must believe Him, because it is the truth. Knowing Christ and having a real relationship with Him in every day life is worth far more than blending in with the world and being lukewarm. Let non-Christians despise you, let them ridicule you, let them say untrue things about you, it does not matter. What matters is that some also might want to belong to Christ, receive His pardon and be justified before God through Christ. You might even lose your job, your income, your popularity, and may be even your life, but when you belong to Christ then you belong to Him always. He is glorious, holy, almighty and all-powerful. The Lord will never, never turn any away who come to Him. So do not lose your love for Him. The world and its Demetriuses appreciate lukewarm Christians but not so Christ. He wants us to disturb society. For His name's sake and that more sinners are saved from hell and experience God's love and forgiveness. Amen.

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