

“Who Called This Meeting?”

(ACTS 19:23-41 NRSV) *About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. ²⁴A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. ²⁵These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, “Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. ²⁶You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. ²⁷And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her.” ²⁸When they heard this, they were enraged and shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” ²⁹The city was filled with the confusion; and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s travel companions. ³⁰Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; ³¹even some officials of the province of Asia, who were friendly to him, sent him a message urging him not to venture into the theater. ³²Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. ³³Some of the crowd gave instructions to Alexander, whom the Jews had pushed forward. And Alexander motioned for silence and tried to make a defense before the people. ³⁴But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours all of them shouted in unison, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” ³⁵But when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, “Citizens of Ephesus, who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis and of the statue that fell from heaven? ³⁶Since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. ³⁷You have brought these men here who are neither temple robbers nor blasphemers of our goddess. ³⁸If therefore Demetrius and the artisans with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls; let them bring charges there against one another. ³⁹If there is anything further you want to know, it must be settled in the regular assembly. ⁴⁰For we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.” ⁴¹When he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.*

This story may leave you scratching your head. Not that it's confusing; but there's no clear message or moral. It's just a story.

The economy at Ephesus centered around the great Temple of Artemis, goddess of fertility. The temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; eight-sided, a bit larger than a football field; 127 pillars, each 60 feet tall. It was the largest stone building in the world at that time. It is reported that, instead of mortar, gold was used to bond the marble blocks together.

The temple supported many businesses; little booths and kiosks where you could buy T-shirts and post cards; but the big money was in the sale of silver trinkets—phallic symbols, fertility charms representing Artemis and her fertility cult.

Paul preached that gods made with hands are not gods at all; and he was so convincing that the Ephesians, by the droves, gave up idolatry; and that negatively impacted the silversmith trade.

A man named Demetrius was "Shop Steward" for the silversmiths, and he called a meeting. When self-interest is at stake and you want to stir people up and get them on your side, there are two basic ways of doing it: you can wave the flag, or you can pound the Bible. You'll almost always get a following.

So, Demetrius said, "These people are undermining the religious foundations of our way of life. They're reducing this great Temple to insignificance—this great shrine where people from all over the civilized world come to worship." Soon he had a crowd chanting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" They got all worked up and stormed the courthouse, where the city council was in session.

The council was caught totally by surprise. Luke says, "...everybody was shouting different things till the council itself had no idea what was going on; most of them did not even know why they were meeting." *[I've been to some church board meetings like that.]*

The Jewish community became concerned. After all, they'd always openly opposed idolatry. What if these people began to blame them for their economic problems? It had happened before.

So they chose Alexander as their spokesman, and coached him to say, "It's Paul's fault; we didn't do anything." But when the mob saw he was a Jew, they started chanting again: "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!"

This went on for a couple of hours, until the city clerk was able to quiet the crowd. Then he said, "These men are no threat to us. The whole world knows the greatness of Diana and this Temple. If you have a problem, take it to court; but if we keep this up we're going to have Roman soldiers all over the place. Go home!" And the crowd broke up. That's it.

Why does Luke include this story in Acts? What is there of value in it for us? **There's no clear message or moral; no bad guys.** Demetrius and the silversmiths are simply businessmen fighting for what's theirs. They've worked hard for what they have; but they're not bad guys.

The Jews aren't bad guys, either. They're scared for their children. They're an occupied people; they have to "get along."

There are bad guys in the story just before this one: evil spirits, books of magic, practitioners of magic, false exorcists, demons... There are no bad guys in today's story. They're businessmen; family people—like us.

In a church I served some years ago, a father and son made fishing bait: spinners and jigs: "Hawg-Callers." Good product. I use them. Suppose some people came into town—foreigners—with a new religion nobody'd ever heard of, and started preaching that fishing was sinful. Their church starts to grow, and pretty soon people stop buying fishing equipment. Don't you suppose my friends at least would

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want to meet with other vendors to see what was going on? Don't you suppose they'd want to see if they could do something?

So, you see, this story's not easy; there's no clear-cut "good-guy/bad-guy" element—not even the pagans and the Jews.

Maybe we could focus on the danger of mixing religion and patriotism. We could talk about that: tell stories about Hitler and how he selectively distorted elements of Christianity to support his crusade for a racially pure, Aryan nation—to justify the systematic slaughter of 6,000,000 Jews. Some people tried to compare President Obama with that; some are trying to do that with President Trump.

We could get that out of this story; but we'd have to stretch a point. That's not what this story's about. In the end, calmer spirits and level heads prevailed, and everybody went home.

Still, damage was done. This incident ended Paul's ministry in Ephesus. He had to leave town and was never able to go back. Later, when he wanted to visit his friends at Ephesus, he had to meet them out of town—a place called Miletus.

Maybe—MAYBE—the key to this story is in verse 32: *"The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there."*

The Oak Ridge Boys released song several years ago:

*"Nobody wants to play rhythm guitar behind Jesus.
Everybody wants to be the lead singer in the band.
It's hard to get a bead on what's divine
When everybody's pushing for the head of the line.
I don't think it's working out like he planned."*

There are any number of groups within the church and outside the church whose intentions are noble and even Christ-like. But their work is counterproductive. Too many people bring their personal agendas—their personal axes to grind.

They lose focus and, distracted from their purpose, they focus, not on their work, but on groups and persons with agendas different from theirs. Their work no longer focuses on their goals, but rather on defeating the other side. *"Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people don't even know why they were there."* The cause gets lost in the shouting, and the gospel is forced out of town.

You see the same thing at church assemblies and in virtually every assembly of government, from the small town City Councils to the "United States Senate."

It is a demon that has many names: partisanism, factionalism, Machiavellianism, "My way or the highway." Wherever it rears its head and casts its spell, the results are always the same: divisiveness, power struggles, and the rebuke of any who disagree. It is the direct opposite of peace and love and unity, and therefore,

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wherever it prevails as the dominant protocol, the gospel is rendered impotent and might as well move on to more fertile fields.

And so Paul moved on to Macedonia. But he left behind a little group of people who held to a different standard when they came together. While all around them people and groups promoted their own agenda—“*Some were shouting one thing, some another,*” the church at Ephesus listened for the voice of the Lord, and worked to discern where the Spirit was leading them.

While partisanism and divisiveness raged until “*Most of the people didn’t even know why they were there,*” the church at Ephesus remained focused on Jesus and remained faithful to His call to follow Him. They refused to be sucked into the vortex of division and hatred.

It is possible to live in the midst of a world gone crazy—to live as Christians and not be swayed by the partisanism and divisiveness all around. It is possible to live at peace with oneself, and in love and harmony with those around you, even when “*Some are shouting one thing, some another.*”

It is possible “to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God”, even when “*Most people don’t even know why they are here.*”

The church at Ephesus remained focused and faithful—amid circumstances much harsher than ours. And As a result, years later a man received a vision from the Lord concerning end times. He committed that vision to writing, and that writing now closes our Bible. And in that writing are these words:

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: ²I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary...
(Revelation 2:1-3 NIV)