



## Revival or Riot!

### Acts 19:23-41

### October 1, 2006

The title of this message is “Revival or Riot!” How many of you have ever been in a great revival? Indeed you have! This past week with Michael Cogdill was a thought-provoking, heart-warming wonderful revival.

How many of you have ever been in a riot? I have. It was the spring of 1974 and NC State’s Jim Valvano and his basketball squad had just won the national championship. Every college student in Raleigh (I was home on break) streamed to Hillsborough Street for a chaotic celebration. All of a sudden I wondered why my eyes were watering and then it dawned on me, “I’m being tear-gassed!” It was a wonderful riot.

Revival or riot! That sums up the story of Paul’s missionary travels. Everywhere Paul went it was either revival or riot or both. Everywhere Paul went -- Antioch, Asia, Europe, Athens, Ephesus – people put their trust in Jesus as their rescuer from sin and death and their leader through all of life. People of every station and situation were revived into new life: slaves, jailers, soldiers, business men and women, religious leaders, government officials. At this point in the story of Acts, Paul has been spending several months in the great city of Ephesus. He’s been holding a revival in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. People have been coming in droves. The message has been spreading beyond the city to the whole region. Throngs of people have made Jesus the leader of their lives. And that has meant that whatever had been the leader of their lives before, whatever they had been worshipping before, was now put away. They realized that all their little silver and gold shrines were just manmade curios that couldn’t do a thing for them. The revival in Ephesus turned the people away from all their little false gods, and turned them to the One God and Father of their Lord Jesus Christ. And THAT’S when revival turned to riot. (Read Acts 19:23-41)

What a riot! Now you may be asking, “What’s the big deal about Artemis of the Ephesians?” Only that the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the world! The goddess Artemis was Mother Earth. She was the divine feminine. She was even the goddess of finance. She was religion and prosperity all wrapped up in one. In the center of her temple was a block of stone that legend said fell down from the heavens from Zeus. It was carved in the image of Artemis. Thousands of tourists would travel thousands of miles to see it. And you know what tourism means: money. Money for the restaurants, money for the hotels, and money for the silversmiths, because you just can’t leave Ephesus without your own little silver statue of Artemis.

But down the street from there was Paul, holding revival services and proclaiming that anything made by human hands is no god at all. The only God is the one who made heaven and earth, the one who made each of us, the one who sent Jesus among us. And when we killed Jesus, God raised him from the dead. The center of religious authority in Ephesus was beginning to shift from the Temple of Artemis to the Lecture Hall of Tyrannus where Paul preached. And the more people turned to Christ, the fewer people bought the silver figures of Artemis. The silversmiths were losing market share, and THAT was the real god of Ephesus: not Artemis, but the money they made on Artemis.

Enter Demetrius, one of the major wholesalers in “devotional goods.” He employed many of the city’s silversmiths. He said, “our prosperity depends on this business of ours... (and) this man Paul has led away a vast number of people...” (*Williams translation of Acts 19:25*) Demetrius was an honest man, for the numbers on the bottom line don’t lie. The only problem with Demetrius was this: he had no qualms with making money on other people’s superstitions, yet when other people’s faith cut into his profits, he squealed.

And Demetrius knew how to squeal. He knew what buttons to push when he spoke to the crowd: the religious pride button, the community pride button, and the money button. After all, religion is just a parlor game until it hits your wallet.

And so the riot began. Hundreds, thousands of shouting Ephesians poured into the theatre. Many of them didn’t even know what the fuss was about. The mob mentality had taken over. When you become part of a mob, you find yourself doing things you would never do by yourself. They grabbed two of Paul’s companions. Paul tried to go in after them and save them, but his friends and even some government officials held him back. It was just too dangerous.

For two hours the mob shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Finally the town clerk defused the situation: “Who in the world DOESN’T know that Artemis is great? Artemis is so great that nothing will threaten the reputation of her or our city. Demetrius, if you’ve got a problem, take it to the courts, or take it to the regular assembly (not this irregular mob). Now clear out of here, before the Romans get tired of this disorder (and if there’s one thing the Romans don’t tolerate, it’s disorder). Go home.” And they did.

So that’s how it was with Paul, either revival or riot. Whenever people turn to the Lord and stop worshipping the puny idols of their culture and their self-interest, then certain vested interests are threatened, and then comes the riot.

Today, it is STILL revival or riot! Do you see where I’m going with this? “Artemis has her devotees in every town, even today.” (*Will Willimon, Anchor Commentary on Acts, p. 151*) In every town in America, people worship that same combination of spirituality and prosperity. In every town, people look out for their own pocketbooks at the expense of others, and then gush about how good God has been to them.

Here's one example: forty years ago in America, the average pay of a chief executive of a major company was about 24 times the average pay of a company worker. Fifteen years ago in America, the pay of a CEO was about 71 times the pay of his workers. And last year, average CEO pay was 300 times the pay of his workers. And this in a country in which half of all the people that have to go to food pantries are people that work hard all week but still cannot afford food or medicine for their children. Meanwhile, some of our more famous preachers just play into all this as they tell us: "God wants you to have the very best." In our country, who is really Lord? Is it Jesus whose heart is broken when a working parent cannot feed his own children? Is it Jesus Christ the crucified One, or is it Artemis the god of prosperity?

Thank God for those who sound a different note, like Rick Warren, who calls his hearers to stop enriching themselves, and start using their wealth to reduce the suffering in the world.

But a warning: anyone who rejects the god of prosperity and worships Jesus Christ instead will be met with a riot of opposition. Once a new pastor came to town and realized that his community had a serious problem with teenagers and drinking. He decided that the best way to fight this was to pressure local stores to stop selling alcohol to underage customers. In fact there was one store right across from the high school that was one of the worst offenders. Problem was, the owner of that store was one of the pillars of that pastor's church. That pastor soon became the former pastor. (*Will Willimon, Anchor Bible Commentary, p. 151*)

In our community, who really is Lord? Is it Jesus Christ the crucified, or is it Artemis the prosperous?

One by-product of our prosperity is that our lives become so full of so much stuff and so many options and so many opportunities that we never had before. We say that Jesus is the ruler of our lives, but our lives are ruled by the overwhelming weight of our schedules and our pursuit of the good life. My friend Hugh Burlington told me of the time that a parent called him and said, "Pastor, you've got to meet with my son because he says he's ready to become a Christian."

Hugh said, "That's great! How about Wednesday evening?"

"No, that's soccer practice."

"How about Thursday evening?"

"No, that's karate practice."

"Well, how about sometime this weekend?"

"No, we're going to our place at the beach."

Hugh shook his head and said, "Now let me get this straight. I thought you were in a hurry for me to meet with your son to help him give his life to the Lord, but you can't find any way to interrupt his schedule?"

The boy's schedule was full of good things, things that would give him self-discipline, give him confidence, give him family time. But it was obvious that all of them would continue to come first, and that faith in Christ would not be allowed to compete with any of them. In your family, who is really Lord? Is it Jesus Christ and the committed life, or is it Artemis and the good life?

Someday your son or daughter will grow up and go to college or to work. When they go to make their own life, will they go with Jesus within them? Will know the rich stories of the gospel? Or will their lives have be so full of prosperity and good living that they won't know how to find the Gospel of Mark in their Bible if their lives depended on it?

One day Dr. Bill Leonard was teaching a religion class at Wake Forest and made a passing reference to the parable of the Prodigal Son. He said something like, "That was a real Prodigal Son moment" or some such reference. After class one of his students came up to him and said, "You are assuming we know more than we do. What story are you talking about?"

When the gospel of Jesus Christ gets hold of us and revives our hearts and minds, when we turn to Jesus as the Lord and leader of our lives, then we will put away our little statues of Artemis. We will put away our worship of prosperity. We will put away our worship of the good life. Simply put, we will put away our worship of ourselves. But know this, if you dare to put away Artemis, you'll have to face the riot that will come from all her vested interests

Who is really Lord in our country, in our community, in our family? Is it Jesus Christ the crucified? Or it is Artemis the prosperous?

-- Douglas E. Murray