

Christ vs. Empire

The Gospel of Luke – Acts of the Apostles

Christ vs. Empire, Part 5: Defund the Idolatry

Acts 19:18 – 41

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Introduction: Are Confederate Flag Makers Making More or Less Money?

A national conversation has been going on about defunding the police. What does it even mean to defund the police? But what does it mean to go deeper? What if we as Jesus-followers are called to defund the idolatry? Idolatry is a Bible term meaning the worship of anything or anyone other than the God revealed in Jesus. It can involve little statues, but it doesn't need to.

Let's start with this: Are confederate flag makers making more or less money? What would you guess? In late June, 2020, Mississippi's Republican-controlled Legislature voted to remove the Civil War emblem from the state flag. It follows the police killing George Floyd in Minnesota and the national debate over racial inequality. Mississippi was the last state to include the confederate flag in its design. Around the same time, NASCAR, born in the South and still popular in the region, banned the Confederate flag from races. That follows an earlier round of Confederate flag and memorial removals in 2015 when one white supremacist young man shot nine Black people at their church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Now some people say the Confederate flag represents Southern culture and not white supremacy, as if the flag is meant to make us think of chicken and waffles more than slavery. But the Confederacy was founded in Montgomery in 1861 with a pro-slavery Constitution. That was its purpose. Read the Confederate Constitution itself. It was illegal to pass laws "denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves." The Confederacy was about enslaving black people. Who waved and waves the Confederate flag? The Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis and other white supremacists who oppose equal rights. Georgia added the battle emblem to its state flag in 1956 in response to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 unanimous U.S. Supreme Court decision to desegregate public schools. Georgia adopted a new flag without the confederate banner in 2003. Alabama flew the battle flag atop its state Capitol until 1993, when it was removed following protests by Black legislators. Additional Confederate flags were removed from around a massive Confederate memorial just outside the building in 2015, when South Carolina also removed its battle flag from the state Capitol grounds after the shooting.

So you might think that the Confederate flag is being defunded. But no: It seems to be defended. A writer for *Slate* says neo-Confederate groups are thriving on Facebook.¹ A writer for the *Associated Press* says, "Just drive along highways [in the South] where Sons of Confederate Veterans members have erected gigantic battle flags or stop by Dixie General Store, where Bob Castello makes a living selling hundreds of rebel-themed shirts, hats, car accessories and more in an east Alabama county named for a Confederate officer, Gen. Patrick Cleburne. "Business is very good right now," Castello said."²

Relevance

What lies behind the Confederate flag industry? White supremacy. What lies behind white supremacy? White Jesus. You can call him "bleached Jesus." White Jesus is the made up thing. Real Jesus is not white. But white Jesus fits a psychology of power where the authority figure looks like white people racially, and white people look like the authority figure. So white people create a false god -- white Jesus -- and project power onto him because he suggests to them that they should be in charge of things.

¹ Chloe Hadavas, "Confederate Groups Are Thriving on Facebook. What Does That Mean for the Platform?" *Slate*, July 31, 2020; <https://slate.com/technology/2020/07/confederate-groups-facebook-hate-speech.html>.

² Jay Reeves, "Confederate Flag Losing Prominence 155 Years After Civil War," *Associated Press* and *WBTW News*, June 30, 2020; <https://www.wbtw.com/news/national/confederate-flag-losing-prominence-155-years-after-civil-war/>.

The same thing happened in Nazi Germany. Scholar Susanna Heschel writes in 2008 in her book, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*. They made huge efforts to take Jesus out of his Jewish context.³ The real Jesus was Jewish, which meant he was brown-skinned and multi-ethnic and challenged the Empires even in his own humanity, because biblical Israel was a multi-ethnic faith, and Jesus was the king of the Israelites, the best representation of Israel. Look at the genealogy in Matthew 1, and you can see that God was weaving in Gentile converts to Judaism into Jesus' ancestry: Tamar the Canaanite from Genesis 38; Rahab the Canaanite from Joshua 7; Ruth the Moabitess from the book of Ruth; Bathsheba the Hittite from 2 Samuel 12. Then, the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:16, "Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer." Jesus' ancestry matters because it is part of his story, and the story of Israel is an inclusive story and invites others. But it's clear from Jesus' resurrection that he transcends what we would call race. He is for all human beings.

White Jesus, by contrast, has been defended in white America. Former Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly said in December 2013 that Jesus is white, and Santa is white.⁴ An author and talk show host named Eric Metaxas tweeted on July 27, 2020 that Jesus was white.⁵ Eric Metaxas tried to mock the idea of "white privilege" by asking, "Did Jesus have white privilege?" In 2014, two historians wrote a book called *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. "Manifest destiny" was the idea of a white Jesus leading white Americans to conquer the land of North America from sea to shining sea, kicking out the Native Americans. In the South, white Southerners believed in a white Jesus who established the plantation slave system as a God-given order, long after the Civil War was over and slavery was abolished. Mormonism believed in a white Jesus who wanted a white United States, and had a white section of heaven, and a black section -- until 1973 when, as the musical *The Book of Mormon* points out, Mormon leadership said that God changed his mind about black people. Hollywood movies portrayed Jesus as white. Short films made by Christians portrayed Jesus as white. This perpetuated the notion that white people should have the most authority.

Robert P. Jones, a researcher and statistician who found that white Christians are more racist than white non-Christians, says, "The unsettling truth is that, for nearly all of American history, the light-skinned Jesus conjured up by most white congregations was not merely indifferent to the status quo of racial inequality; he demanded its defense and preservation as part of the natural, divinely ordained order of things."⁶

³ Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008)

⁴ Hadas Gold, "Megyn Kelly: Jesus and Santa Were White," *Politico*, December 12, 2013; <https://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2013/12/megyn-kelly-jesus-and-santa-were-white-179491>.

⁵ Leonardo Blair, "Eric Metaxas Rebuked on Twitter for Declaring 'Jesus Was White'," *Christian Post*, July 29, 2020; <https://www.christianpost.com/news/eric-metaxas-rebuked-on-twitter-for-declaring-jesus-was-white.html> and Eric Vanden Eykel, "Conservative Evangelical Eric Metaxas, Doing Twitter Theology, Claims 'Jesus Was White'," *Religion Dispatches*, July 29, 2020; <https://religiondispatches.org/conservative-evangelical-eric-metaxas-doing-twitter-theology-claims-jesus-was-white/>. It is significant that Eric Metaxas' political judgments and loyalties led him to support Trump in 2016 and 2020. Metaxas had written a biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who joined the resistance movement against Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany: See Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010). Yet the International Bonhoeffer Society called for ending Donald Trump's Presidency because of the rise of fascism in the U.S.: See Jim Wallis, "International Bonhoeffer Society Calls for 'Ending Donald Trump's Presidency' in 'Statement of Concern,'" *Sojourners*, January 16, 2020; <https://sojo.net/articles/international-bonhoeffer-society-calls-ending-donald-trumps-presidency-statement-concern>. Metaxas' interest in Bonhoeffer and support for Trump was contradictory. His book must be retrospectively regarded as a work of carelessness, or a reflection of his own personal intellectual limits, or a deliberate attempt at recasting Bonhoeffer so white American evangelicals would be more inured to an alliance between white evangelicals and white supremacists. Prior to 2016, Metaxas was criticized for reducing Bonhoeffer to white American evangelical tastes and interests. Richard Weikart notes that Bonhoeffer questioned key tenets of historic Christian orthodoxy, as he was influenced heavily by the irrationalism of Danish Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. Weikart is steeped in European intellectual history -- of which Bonhoeffer was as well -- and criticizes Metaxas for not adequately understanding Bonhoeffer's background, context, and concerns (<https://www.csustan.edu/history/metaxas-counterfeit-bonhoeffer>). Charles Marsh discusses the historians' observations of Bonhoeffer's likely same-sex attraction, and Metaxas' aversion to discussing it, despite Bonhoeffer's sexual chastity (<https://medium.com/@jonward11/charles-marsh-responds-to-eric-metaxas-19401b6d1bf3>).

⁶ Robert P. Jones, "Racism Among White Christians is Higher Than Among the Nonreligious. That's No Coincidence." *NBC News*, July 27, 2020; <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/racism-among-white-christians-higher-among-nonreligious-s-no-coincidence-ncna1235045>. See also Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2020)

Text and Context

When authentic Christian faith challenges the Empire, it is always a challenge to defund the idolatry. But the Empire does strike back. And we're going to see an example of that in the Book of Acts.

Here at Neighborhood Church of Dorchester, we are in message 5 of a series called *Christ vs. Empire*. In message 1, we saw how the Bible characterizes human empires as deformed beasts with mixed parts, because the power dynamics of a conquering group over an oppressed group is a deformity from God's perspective. We saw Jesus as the Son of Man, the truly human one, be enthroned over the beastly empires in Daniel 7. We also talked about the United States as a racial Empire. In messages 2 and 3, we saw Jesus and his opening act, John the Baptist, challenge the empire of their day, the Roman Empire. They challenged the tax collectors, the exploitation class, and the soldiers, the police terror class, to stay in their jobs but repent of very important parts of the Empire's injustice. We talked about how we might do that in the U.S. In message 4, we talked about Pentecost vs. Christian Nationalism, and how Jesus' mission is to have Christians in a nation, but not Christian nations. There is no such thing as a Christian nation, which will continue to be a very important conviction. Today, we tackle message 5: Defund the Idolatry.

The Book of Acts is part two, where the Gospel of Luke is part one. Luke appears to have written these two volumes to explain how the Jesus movement started with Jesus, and then confronted the Empires through his followers. The apostle Paul even goes all the way to Rome to stand trial before Caesar. The Book of Acts is not about Jesus being the one who died to solve a problem within God. The Book of Acts is about Jesus being "another king" (Acts 17:7).

Acts 19 is the height of Paul's ministry before he goes to Jerusalem, gets arrested, and is taken to Rome to be placed under house arrest to await his trial. Acts 19 is very similar to Luke 19 because that was the height of Jesus' ministry before he entered Jerusalem, called for the temple to be defunded, got arrested, and faced his trial. Luke 19 is when Zaccheus comes to Christ, and Zaccheus was the chief tax collector and the most powerful man of the Empire outside the Jewish priests and Roman leaders. Jesus then sees the city of Jerusalem divide itself between those who support him and those who reject him, those who want to defund the idolatry, and those who want to defend it. Acts 19 is when Paul is in the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor, and very influential people come to Christ. Paul then sees the city of Ephesus divide itself between those who support him and those who reject him, those who want to defund the idolatry and those who want to defend it. We are going to watch how this conflict unfolds, and how the Empire uses certain tactics against Christ.

Here's a little background on Ephesus, which is important because Ephesus is a lot like the U.S. today. Ephesus was a proud city. Under the Greeks, it was one of the twelve cities of the Ionian League, the first alliance of city-states in the region. Under the Romans, it was the capital of western Asia Minor. At around the time Paul went there, the Greek historian and philosopher Strabo (64/63 BC – 24 AD) called Ephesus the most important city in the Empire, next to Rome itself. Ephesus was the home of one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: the great Temple of Artemis. It was also rich and had a history of over 1,000 years. It had an outdoor stone amphitheater that could seat 25,000 people. But the Cayster River was steadily bringing silt into the harbor, creating marshlands. This was causing malaria. And, fewer ships could come to dock and trade. It is a lot like the United States, home to the temple of the Federal Reserve Bank – perhaps the most powerful institution in the world – and the U.S. military which backs it up. Once the world's superpower, the U.S. is now in economic decline, and also vulnerable to disease.⁷

⁷ COVID-19 is but the most recent and painful of the diseases, especially because it is the "fast pandemic." The "slow pandemic" is obesity and other human-caused diseases resulting from our predatory food corporations and respiratory problems caused by pollution. It is telling that even tropical diseases are an underreported reality, in areas where white supremacy reigned and blocked public infrastructure projects involving water and sewage. A broad example would be the lack of proper water and sewage systems—which depend on public funding and civic good will. Peter J. Hotez, "Neglected Parasitic Infections and Poverty in the United States," *PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases*, September 4, 2014; <https://journals.plos.org/plosntds/article?id=10.1371/journal.pntd.0003012> estimates "at least 12 million Americans" in the South and Midwest suffer from neglected tropical diseases. Journalist Ed Pilkington, "Hookworm, a Disease of Extreme Poverty, Is Thriving in the US South. Why?" *The Guardian*, September 5, 2017; <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/05/hookworm-lowndes-county-alabama-water-waste-treatment-poverty> tells the story of Dr. Peter J. Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine, who led a team of scientists in 2017 to Lowndes County, Alabama. There they

What Repentance Looks Like: v.18 – 20

In Ephesus, Paul faces Jewish repentance and opposition, then Gentile repentance and opposition. We're going to focus on the Gentile section. In Acts 19:18 – 20, a group of magicians burn their books. Their books of magic are occult secrets. They were worth fifty thousand pieces of silver. That is repentance. And it is very impressive that Luke records the market value of those occult books. How do you know people are really repenting? When it hits them financially.

The Money Motive: v.23 – 25

But next comes the opposition. And how do we see their opposition? They hoard their money. The silversmiths lead a riot. In v.23, "About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way. 24 For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen; 25 these he gathered together with the workmen of similar trades, and said, 'Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business.'"

If you have a physical copy of the Bible, stop right there and circle the end of v.25. Seldom do you find such honest statements as this one. "Our prosperity depends upon this business." These are the first words out of Demetrius the silversmith's mouth. It's not, "Our traditional culture is..." It's about a base profit motive. Kind of like the bread industry in the face of these low-carb diets, or the soda companies in the face of "our prosperity depends on this business." It was extremely insulting to have someone in the Greco-Roman world say of you that you were materialistic. And yet Luke does precisely that. He does not hold back because this guy was a mob leader.

To the silversmiths, Artemis was everything. She was portrayed in statues as a goddess with many breasts. She symbolized fertility and prosperity, especially to the silversmiths. So let's not even pretend that we are motivated by higher ideals. For Demetrius and his cronies, it comes down to money. On the surface, the issue is pagan religious practice. But underneath, the issue is materialism, plain and simple (e.g. Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5). The ex-magicians gave up fifty thousand pieces of silver. But Demetrius isn't letting one more silver coin go without a fight.

But wait. Do we have idols today? Do we have idolatry today? Now it would be easy to say that we don't because we don't have little statues today. But you know, an idol is just a physical manifestation of a deeper spiritual problem. Isaiah 46 and Romans 1 describe idol worship as people's attempt to control the world around them. People turned to idols because they wanted to control the outcomes of harvests, the weather, war, fortune, anything. An idol is an expression of the human desire for control, control that we do not want God to have. Defined that way, there are plenty of idols. Like white Jesus, or the bleached Jesus that never challenges the Empire.

That's why I started with Confederate flag makers. Are they making more or less money? White Jesus is an idol, because white Jesus is a false god and the purpose of white Jesus is to oppose the real Jesus. White Jesus is an idol that stands for many heresies: the heresy of slavery,⁸ the heresy of the "doctrine of discovery" that said white people

discovered that 34 percent of the residents—who are black—have hookworm, a tropical parasite associated with extreme poverty in underdeveloped countries. Alabama's water management systems are otherwise quite developed. James E. Hairston et al., "Water Resources in Alabama," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, September 21, 2015, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1645> point out, for instance, "Alabama ranks sixth and tenth, respectively, in water used for thermonuclear power generation and water withdrawn for industrial, commercial, or mining uses." The state of Alabama simply opposes extending public infrastructure there. Imagine being a child growing up next to a pool of water infested by hookworm.

⁸ My research on slavery in the Bible, and slavery in early Christianity, are both found here in various papers: www.anastasiscenter.org/race-slavery-belief-systems. The claim that the Bible justified and supported trans-Atlantic slavery is fatally undermined by both Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, Jewish law in Exodus 21:16 and Deuteronomy 24:7 call for the death penalty for anyone who kidnaps another person into slavery, or sells another person into slavery. Deuteronomy 23:15 – 16 requires the Israelites to not return a runaway, fugitive slave to his/her master, but instead support him/her. The Hebrew *ebed* institution was clearly identical to the colonialist enslavement of Africans in the trans-Atlantic trade as well as Native Americans in the Caribbean and the Americas. There are many other differences. In the New Testament, Christian thought required Christians to recognize the claim of Jesus on people's bodies, as Jesus declared himself to be the primary authority over people's bodies: 1 Corinthians 6:18 – 20 declared this, and Paul applied that conviction in 1 Corinthians 7 to limit

could “discover” land and take it,⁹ and the heresy that “meritocracy” allows white people to take Native American land because white people are more productive.¹⁰ And that is why the profiteers of white supremacy are not just people who make and sell Confederate flags. That’s not the Temple of Artemis. The equivalent of the Temple of Artemis is the system of banking and capital, headed by the Federal Reserve Bank¹¹ but including the entire financial system including real estate and land ownership, along with the U.S. military, defense corporations, and police power, because that’s how that white supremacy guards its wealth. That started long ago.

Here’s a historical example. John Ehrlichman, who was Richard Nixon’s former drug czar had this to confess: “The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”¹²

Christians’ interaction with Greco-Roman forms of slavery, as well as the creational institution of marriage, and the Jewish-Gentile question of Gentile circumcision. Early Christian leaders like Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom of Constantinople recognized the importance of 1 Corinthians 6 – 7 in the way they limited and argued against Greco-Roman forms of slavery.

⁹ Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019); Mark Charles, “The Doctrine of Discovery – A Buried Apology and an Empty Chair,” *WirelessHogan: Reflections from the Hogan*, December 22, 2014; <http://wirelesshogan.blogspot.com/2014/12/doctrine-of-discovery.html>. Mark Tooley, “With Fixation on ‘Doctrine of Discovery,’ Christians Ape a Secular Alternative to Christian Doctrine,” *The Stream*, August 7, 2018; <https://stream.org/christian-guilt-and-doctrine-of-discovery> fails to uphold the importance of repentance and restitution for both heresy and injustice (Ex.22:1 – 14; 2 Sam.12:6; Lk.19:1 – 10), using “Jesus redeems” as an excuse to not repent; Tooley fails to distinguish between Western civilization and that which is evil in Western civilization; he fails to recognize the Christian vocation to be better than the pagans, especially in relations of power and restorative justice.

¹⁰ John Locke is the foremost Enlightenment political theorist who influenced the American founders. In *Two Treatises of Government* (1688), he argued for political liberalism at home in England, with a limited government only defending property rights and contracts, yet argued for taking Native lands in the American colonies. How? With a heretical interpretation of Genesis 1, making “dominion” conditional on “development.” He also told deliberate falsehoods about the Natives. Morag Barbara Arneil, “‘All the World Was America’: John Locke and the American Indian,” University College London, PhD dissertation 1992; <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.283910> shows how Locke relied very selectively on travel journals and books in his library for information about Native Americans to portray them unfavorably, as “lazy” and ignorant, which would become a common racial trope. Nagamitsu Miura, *John Locke and the Native Americans: Early English Liberalism and Its Colonial Reality*, Cambridge Scholars, 2013; <http://cambridgescholars.com/download/sample/59280> writes a devastating and integrated analysis of Locke along these lines. John Quiggin, “John Locke Against Freedom,” *Jacobin Magazine*, June 28, 2015; <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/06/locke-treatise-slavery-private-property/> argues even more strongly that Locke legitimized expropriation and enslavement. Quiggin notes that even SCOTUS case *Keto v. City of New London, Connecticut* (2005) relied on faulty Lockean assumptions. Bryan Caplan, “Do Indians Rightfully Own America?” *EconLog*, September 2012; https://www.econlib.org/archives/2012/09/do_indians_righ.html makes an argument based on the very theory of property – Lockean individualism – that is in question, showing the vulnerability of his argument. Caplan never mentions formal treaties between Native tribes and the U.S. government, either. Paul Corcoran, “John Locke on the Possession of Land: Native Title vs. the ‘Principle’ of Vacuum Domicilium,” University of Adelaide, date unknown; https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/44958/1/hdl_44958.pdf attempts to exonerate Locke by attributing ignorance to him, and in any case overlooks completely the heretical nature of Locke’s attempt to frame his theory of property from Genesis 1, and the English background as King Henry VIII seized Catholic land in the Dissolution of the Monasteries. See also Mako A. Nagasawa, “The Reality of Systemic Racism, Part 1: Housing & Education,” *The Anástasis Center for Christian Education & Ministry*, June 23, 2020; <http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/article-systemic-racism-1-housing-&-schooling.pdf>.

¹¹ William Greider, *Secrets of the Temple: How the Federal Reserve Runs the Country* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1987). Greider’s book title is poetically appropriate. But the import was reinforced during the financial crash of 2008 – 09. Paul Langley, *Liquidity Lost: The Governance of the Global Financial Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) discusses how Anglo-American bankers and politicians at the Fed and Wall Street defined the financial crisis of 2008. They defined it in terms of “liquidity” with regards to the U.S. housing market. This diagnosis already implied an answer: “quantitative easing,” i.e. the printing of more money. But they defined the crisis in terms of “risk of default” with regards to Greece, to which the answer was “austerity.” This suggests that some financiers get to define problems and solutions for political reasons. It also strongly suggests that the whiteness of Anglo-American banking and capital interests will not easily be changed.

¹² Dan Baum, “Legalize It All,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 2016; <https://harpers.org/archive/2016/04/legalize-it-all/>.

Remember that idols are also located in a particular place, and the power of idol is supposedly greater there. That's why in ancient times, the priests of the idol were the power-brokers. They were closest. Then came wealthy people, let's say. And then foreigners were at a distance. What made Jesus revolutionary was that he did away with places being special. To the Samaritan woman of John 4, he said, "Not in any temple, but in spirit and in truth will people worship the Father." And when he was enthroned as king in the heavens, he was present to all creation, but stripped any particular place of special power. But the idol of white Jesus and the worshipers of Christian nationalism want to be close to power.

Idolatry and Group Identity: v.26 – 27

But look at how the powerful speak in public. In Ephesus, Demetrius the silversmith does two things. First, he offers rhetoric appealing to people's group identity and civic pride. Second, he organizes a mob. The rhetoric of civic pride sounds like this. Listen to how materialism is melded to and covered over by a people's group identity: "26 You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all. 27 Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence.'

Demetrius is seizing on some powerful group fears and group pride. Yet that happens in the U.S. One newscaster said a day after September 11th, "Show everyone how great the United States is. Go shopping." And when we criticize this or even stand against it in the name of Jesus, you'll hear this kind of rhetoric. You're not a faithful American unless you do. Ultimately what is at stake is the idol – in their case, Artemis, in today's case, white Jesus.

The Rage of the Masses: v.28 – 34

Well, does that language work? It does. The mob chanting starts in v.28: "When they heard this and were filled with rage, they began crying out, saying, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' 29 The city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed with one accord into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia." Paul, though, wants to go into the mob in v.30: "And when Paul wanted to go into the assembly, the disciples would not let him. 31 Also some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his sent to him and repeatedly urged him not to venture into the theater." But we see cracks in the facade in v.32: "So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together." This is a badly organized group. Their cohesion is not absolute. And in v.33, the crowd finds a scapegoat: "Some of the crowd concluded it was Alexander, since the Jews had put him forward; [and Jews also criticized idol-worship, which they shared in common with Christians] and having motioned with his hand, Alexander was intending to make a defense to the assembly. 34 But when they recognized that he was a Jew, a single outcry arose from them all as they shouted for about two hours, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!'" That's a long time to shout.

These Ephesians do not want to defund their idolatry. They want to defend it. White American Christians want to defend their idolatry, too. Just two weeks ago on Wednesday, August 12, President Trump tweeted this:¹³

¹³ Donald J. Trump, Twitter, 7:59AM, August 12, 2020; <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1293517514798960640>. See Sylvan Lane, "Trump Pitches Fair Housing Repeal to 'Suburban Housewife' with Racist Tropes," *The Hill*, August 12, 2020; <https://thehill.com/policy/finance/511650-trump-pitches-fair-housing-repeal-to-suburban-housewife-with-racist-tropes>.



Donald J. Trump ✓
@realDonaldTrump

The “suburban housewife” will be voting for me. They want safety & are thrilled that I ended the long running program where low income housing would invade their neighborhood. Biden would reinstall it, in a bigger form, with Corey Booker in charge! @foxandfriends
@MariaBartirromo

7:59 AM · Aug 12, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

This is racial fearmongering. Joe Biden had not said he would put Senator Corey Booker in charge of HUD. So why did Trump say that? Because Booker is a black man. It’s racial fearmongering. And why talk about the suburbs? Because white people have built racial segregation into the real estate market to buy their distance from black and brown people. If you don’t believe me, read a 2018 study done by the Brookings Institute.¹⁴ They found that a house in a black neighborhood is worth \$48,000 less than the same house in a white neighborhood. We’re talking houses of equal quality, in neighborhoods of equal quality in terms of schools and crime rates. That’s not even talking about the inequality of housing, where black people’s civil rights and 14th Amendment constitutional rights were violated because the government used taxpayer dollars through the Federal Housing Authority and GI Bill to subsidize white flight into the suburbs and redline away the home values of people of color.¹⁵ Today, across the nation, enough white people are willing to pay on average \$48,000 more to not live among black and brown people. The details vary, but the underlying story is the same.¹⁶

In fact, a writer for *Religion News Service* says, “Why Do Evangelicals Support Trump? Blame the Suburbs.”¹⁷ About 34% of all white evangelicals live in suburbs, which is more than cities, small towns, and rural areas, which explains the growth of white megachurches. So we have political leaders who are now willing to “say the quiet part out loud.” But we call for defunding the idolatry. Then mob chanting breaks out.

¹⁴ Andre M. Perry, Jonathan Rothwell, and David Harshbarger, “The Devaluation of Assets in Black Neighborhoods,” *Brookings Institute*, November 27, 2018; <https://www.brookings.edu/research/devaluation-of-assets-in-black-neighborhoods/> and Andre Perry, “Homeowners Have Lost \$156 Billion by Living in a ‘Black Neighborhood,’” *CNN*, December 7, 2018; <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/06/perspectives/black-home-ownership-undervalued-brookings/index.html>. Ivana Davidovic, “The Frustration of Trying to Invest in My Hometown,” *BBC*, July 26, 2020; <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-53473239> points out how banks appraise black neighborhoods and business zones lower, sometimes dramatically so, with the result being that equity investments are less available and smaller. Debra Kamin, “Black Homeowners Face Discrimination in Appraisals,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/25/realestate/blacks-minorities-appraisals-discrimination.html> writes, “Companies that value homes for sale or refinancing are bound by law not to discriminate. Black homeowners say it happens anyway.” Kamin provides multiple examples of discrimination.

¹⁵ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold Story of Racial Inequality in Twentieth Century America* (New York: W.W. Nelson & Co, 2005); cf. Hilary Herbold, “Never a Level Playing Field: Blacks and the GI Bill,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Winter 1994; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2962479?seq=1>. Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017). Matthew Chambers, Carlos Garriga, and Don E. Schlagenhauf, “The New Deal, the GI Bill, and the Postwar Housing,” *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis*, February 14, 2012; https://economicdynamics.org/meetpapers/2012/paper_1050.pdf is one attempt at economically quantifying the impact of various government actions.

¹⁶ E.g. Amy Dain, “Trump’s ‘Suburban Lifestyle Dream’ Is Real: Just Look At Greater Boston’s Housing Plans,” *WBUR*, August 24, 2020; <https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2020/08/24/boston-housing-suburban-lifestyle-dream-inequity-zoning-reading-wellesley-amy-dain> says, “Throughout the region, homeowners unite to protect their neighborhoods from change. They set forth objectives like Reading’s: “Preserve the town as a primarily single-family, owner-occupied residential community” and adopt laws to advance the cause.”

¹⁷ Ryan Burge, “Why Do Evangelicals Support Trump? Blame the Suburbs.” *Religious News Service*, July 30, 2019; <https://religionnews.com/2019/07/30/why-do-evangelicals-support-trump-blame-the-suburbs/>. One welcome counterexample is Greg Jarrell, “How the ‘Suburban Lifestyle Dream’ and Suburban Church Created Suburban Jesus,” *Baptist News Global*, August 13, 2020; https://baptistnews.com/article/how-the-suburban-lifestyle-dream-and-suburban-church-created-suburban-jesus/#.X0J_cchKq2w.

The Rhetoric is Dishonest

I want us to pay attention to how the agents of Empire defend their idolatry instead of defund it. The power brokers are always a minority. But they have to appeal to enough people. So what do they do? They use an idol. And they get people to worship the idol. In the case of Ephesus, Artemis. In the case of the U.S., white Jesus.

One early example is the Southern lost cause. Where white Southern evangelicals put the confederate flag in their church sanctuaries. Southern evangelicals believed that slavery was biblical. And if slavery was biblical, then the defeat of the confederacy was not an improvement. It was the country turning away from the Bible and away from God. During the Civil Rights Movement, white Southern evangelicals pressed for racial segregation. Mississippi Praying by Carolyn DuPont explains how Southern white evangelicals mobilized against *Brown v. Board*. The pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas preached a “fiery sermon” telling other pastors in the Southern Baptist Conference to fight *Brown v. Board* and racial integration. That church was the largest in the Southern Baptist denomination at the time, and pastor W.A. Criswell went on to become president of the SBC in 1969.¹⁸ And then they portrayed the Civil Rights Movement as a secular movement. They claimed MLK was a “Marxist.” In reality, it was a Christian movement, led by black church leaders and people of goodwill. It was a retelling of the American dynamic where Christians argued against Christians. But the white evangelicals with their white Jesus and white Empire didn’t want to concede that fact. Some on the secular left also wanted to portray this as a secular movement, and that has created its own problems. There are idolatries on the left and we’ll have to talk about that another time.

The worshipers of white Jesus became fluent in dishonest rhetoric. Here are more examples:

- During the Civil Rights Movement, the first person to use the phrase “the liberal media” was George Wallace, a white supremacist and segregationist, and Richard Nixon made that a slogan.¹⁹ It led to the view that conservatives need “conservative media.”
- The phrase “government is always wasteful” was used by Ronald Reagan, with his “welfare queen” trope, but it goes back to the days of Reconstruction. White Southerners didn’t want the federal government interfering with their white supremacy, so they wanted to portray the federal government as especially corrupt and wasteful.²⁰
- The phrase “welfare destroys the family” comes from the Civil Rights era. But welfare doesn’t destroy the family. It helps poor families stay together and children reach higher levels of health and achievement.²¹ And in fact, the government gave huge amounts of money to white people.²² And it worked. It built the American middle class and the longest economic expansion in U.S. history.

¹⁸ Curtis W. Freeman, ““Never Had I Been So Blind”: W. A. Criswell’s “Change” on Racial Segregation.” *Journal of Southern Religion* 10, 2007; <http://jsr.fsu.edu/Volume10/Freeman.pdf>.

¹⁹ David Greenberg, “The Idea of “the Liberal Media” and Its Roots in the Civil Rights Movement,” *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics, and Culture*, Volume 1, 2008, Issue 2; <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17541320802457111>

²⁰ Jeff Wallenfelt and the Editors, “Carpetbagger,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*; <https://www.britannica.com/topic/carpetbagger> summarize the history by saying this: “Republican-led racially integrated Reconstruction state legislatures were long and widely portrayed as corrupt and incompetent, but, though corruption was present in these legislatures, it was likely no more prevalent than in other 19th-century state governments. That Reconstruction state governments got into financial trouble was more likely due to their overspending—resulting from efforts to revive the economies under bankrupt postwar governments and to fund educational and other public institutions—than to an abnormal level of attempts at personal enrichment through corruption.”

²¹ Jason Furman, “Smart Social Programs,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2015;

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/11/opinion/smart-social-programs.html> summarizes research on (and links to) housing vouchers, the earned-income tax credit, Medicaid, food stamps, early childhood interventions. David Brooks, “A Sensible Version of Donald Trump,” *New York Times*, October 27, 2015; <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/27/opinion/a-sensible-version-of-donald-trump.html> is one example of a conservative thinker who acknowledges, based on the early childhood education data results, that peer groups and neighborhoods matters. Looking at the violations of the 14th Amendment rights of black American citizens, as well as the ongoing legacy of housing discrimination by race, David Brooks, “The Case for Reparations,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2019; <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/07/opinion/case-for-reparations.html> calls himself “a slow convert to the cause.”

²² In the form of land grants starting with the Homestead Act of 1862 when the federal government gave up to 160 free acres of land to individual white American men, adding to up nearly 10 percent of the total land area of the eventual U.S.; funding land grant colleges to teach people to farm; funding farmers through the New Deal and USDA; subsidizing home mortgage loans to white Americans through the Federal Housing Authority and the GI Bill; subsidizing American defense and infrastructure businesses in the post-WWII era, especially oil and gas, automobiles, aerospace, security, electronics, and biotech; giving

- The phrase “the free market is the best for innovation and preventing waste” is another dishonest slogan covering over the idolatry of white Jesus. Well, the free market can be helpful, but the government Defense Department has funded the computer, the internet, almost every component in your iPhone, and on and on.²³ Many Trump supporters in 2016 said they wanted new trade deals and infrastructure spending to create jobs or bring back manufacturing jobs.²⁴ Those were big government moves, not just free market ones.

Conclusion: Those Who Defund and Those Who Defend Idolatry

After two hours, the mob gets tired. City officials flatter the people and get them to go home (v.35 – 41). What do we learn from this conflict?

We call for the defunding of idolatry, of course the white Jesus but also the structures of power associated with white Jesus. And we will face those who defend white Jesus. So we expect a conflict. And this conflict is spiritual because it is about self-interest. It is not just about educating people. It is about calling people to the one true Jesus, the real Jesus of Nazareth, the true representative of the ancient Israelites, so they can repent.

Not every fight is yours personally, but clearly Jesus expects us to share in his courage. So if we don't enter the arena this time, the question is whether we have helped others do so and proclaim Jesus. Finally, we must be skilled at deconstructing their defending the idolatry. It almost always boils down to money and power. Lord Jesus, help us!

employees health care insurance through corporate employers so corporations get a tax break and the government (i.e. all taxpayers) pay a sizable portion of the health insurance. See next footnote, the link there, and the bibliographic resources at that site.

²³ See Sangwong Yang and Mako A. Nagasawa, “Reparations and the Key Question in Restorative Justice: A Long Repentance Post #15,” *The Anastasis Center for Christian Education & Ministry*, January 4, 2020;

<https://newhumanityinstitute.wordpress.com/2020/01/04/reparations-and-the-key-question-in-restorative-justice-a-long-repentance-post-15-the-anastasis-center-sangwon-yang-mako-nagasawa/> and the bibliography in the footnotes

²⁴ Chris Ladd, “Unspeakable Realities Block Universal Health Coverage In America,” *Forbes*, March 13, 2017; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chrisladd/2017/03/13/unspeakable-realities-block-universal-health-coverage-in-the-us/#13da74a6186a>.