

## “Confronting Religious Tourists”

Text: Acts 17:22-31 Paul preaches to the Philosophers in Athens

May 1, 2005 at CCPC by James Brassard

Paul is making an unexpected visit to Athens. His sermon on Christ being crucified and resurrected had angered his opponents at Thessalonica so much they had followed him to his next preaching stop in order to incite riots in the crowds there. Rather than risk his safety, the believers in that town sent him off to Athens for some "R&R."

Someone must have said, “Paul, you look stressed and the situation is tense—why not take the chance to take in the sites in Athens? The attack dogs will stop barking and go home. Then you can get back to the Lord's work. After all, all work and no play makes for an unhappy boy.”

So Paul, the **Reluctant Tourist**, takes in the sites, tours the famous city to **find out** about its renowned people. Paul is a Type AAA personality. **He can't turn it off.**

I see this **type** when on vacation in Mexico or the Caribbean. I check into the hotel with my scuba gear and golf clubs and the guy next to me comes in lugging his laptop and briefcase. I head to the beach to watch the waves and catch some sun, this guy pulls up with papers and gazes at his Blackberry. Paul is like this. Paul can't relax. He can't let something he disagrees with go unchallenged. He can't **let an opportunity** to challenge the minds and pry open the hearts of non-believers go by.

So when he finds city shrines and altars **dedicated to a variety of idols** and a pantheon of gods, he debates their existence wherever and with whomever he can.

- In the synagogue with the Jews
- in the marketplace with the buyers
- in the town center with the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers.

It is at this **last location**—the famous **Areopagus**, where Paul give his only performance with an **entirely pagan audience**. Paul usually liked to debate people who are religious seekers—non-practicing Jews, religiously minded Greeks. Paul got most of his converts from people who were halfway there toward a belief in Christ. Paul would be very comfortable with the 95% of Americans who say they believe in God but when questioned have **widely diverse opinions** as to the **character** of God.

But here in the **intellectual capital of the world**— Paul tries to **convert the philosopher-citizens** who are quite comfortable with worship of idols. He tries to convince SPIRITUAL FOLKS who like to **say they believe in God** but permit that 'GOD' to have no claim on their personal values, and provide no guides for their moral behavior, over to his Christian beliefs. I would call them **Religious Tourists**. they like to see and listen to new ideas, to sample current SPIRITUAL PRACTICES on the religious MENU, but want to keep a God **who is worshiped and followed at a safe distance**.

The Athenians, whose central altar is dedicated TO AN UNKNOWN GOD, are trying to **cover all the bases**.

When I visit my **Mom out in loose-y goose-y southern California** this is a common sight at any shopping center. . . an old VW micro bus, or snappy new BMW—that has a rabbit's foot sitting on the door strap, a sacred heart air freshener dangling from the rear view mirror, a "bobble head Buddha" sitting on the dashboard, and a Darwin "fish with feet" emblem on the trunk. Sometimes added to the incongruity will be a bumper sticker declaring that "*when the apocalypse comes, this car will be empty.*"

The great Apostle Paul is addressing **two radically different ends of the philosophical spectrum**. On the one hand are the Epicureans—primarily focused on the pleasures available in this life. Their motto: *If it feels good, do it!* On the other side, the Stoics who were concerned with living a morally correct, rationally informed life. The Stoic ideal is trying to live in harmony with nature without believing in God.

Myers-Briggs typography: The Epicureans were the strong **F feelers** and the Stoics were the **strict T**.

On the surface, there is nothing wrong with being driven by strong feelings or being intellectually curious. In the extreme form of these philosophies, however, faith can be distorted and these very philosophies themselves can become idols. Paul confronts the the idol of EXPERIENCE (The Epicurean-pleasure seeker) and the idol of intellectualism (the Stoic Philosopher).

### **1. First, let's talk about the experience idol.**

All pastors and elders struggle with **nominal Christians** who are always seeking an intense and very personal experience with God. We have language for it and it is biblical—"We refer to it as the "MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCE."

The religious high...during the 70's used the phrase--"**Get high on Jesus.**"

As the percentage of people who take Christianity seriously declines in our culture, the temptation is to **Go shallow but touch all the right buttons**

- use music to tug at the emotions,
- To preach a "feel good" gospel.

A similar thing is happening in sports. Traditional games like baseball are losing their younger audience. The reasoning is that baseball is too slow and cerebral. So entrepreneurs have introduced **extreme sports—high risk adrenaline rushes designed** to draw those THRILL SEEKERS.

Paul refuses to go shallow and to make the God he knows in Jesus Christ into the **least common spiritual denominator**. He starts where they are coming from—points out that since they have so many statues to idols that they are at least on the surface very religious people. Like current day skilled national politicians, he probably picked up a little of the local dialect. He probably loosed them up with joke to let down their guard. Yet he tells them their **search for these idols is misguided and futile**.

"I worship not an unknown God, but a God who can be known, but just as importantly who wants to know you," Paul tells them. "But this God wants more than your

temporary curiosity—he wants your devotion and he wants to be part of how you make decisions in your life. This God wants to help you find meaning and purpose. This God wants you to get off the **dead end religious tourist trap** and to find a home where relationships are real, and love is expressed in concrete and consistent ways."

Paul has **known Mountaintop Experiences**. His conversion experience is one of the most dramatic ever told. He talks ELSEWHERE about having been **ascended in dreams** to the highest heaven. YET Paul is suspicious of the religious ecstasies. He has spoken in tongues but knows that often that gift is misused.

A Professor friend of mine told of lecturing one summer at **Princeton University**. In the dining hall he ran into a woman and he **asked her what she was studying**. "Theology" she replied. "Oh really," he said. They talked more. She was a Roman Catholic nun but had not been one for long. Formerly a buyer for Macy's in NY, she said "***I had a nice apartment and everything was going my way. In fact I was engaged to be married. About 2 months before the wedding I prayed and thought, thought and prayed, and then called my fiance over and gave him back the ring.***"

Some months later, she was wearing her nun's habit on the subway and right in front of her was her former fiance. She said hello and he said hello..they both cried and said good-bye again - a very emotional scene.

My friend asked her, "DOES IT HURT?" "VERY MUCH?"  
"THEN WHY DID YOU DO IT?"

She said that she did it because "**not everyone lives by the principle, "IF IT FEELS GOOD, DO IT!"**"

2. The second idol is the idol of intellectualism.

In these days of **anti-intellectualism**, where ideas lose out to sound bites, and slogans replace clearly reasoned arguments, we perhaps long for places where ideas are taken seriously. We like for the church to be a place where you don't have to close down your brain to participate in the experience.

But there is a paradox: The keen and curious mind can help open the heart to Christ. But a **hardened heart** attached to an **active mind** can easily find ample reasons not to believe.

The latest thing in colleges are **departments of religion**. The popularity is probably due to the rise in spirituality and the increase in young people who have no real experience in a church community. Will Willomon tells of an **undergraduate at Duke** who complained about her college's religion department. The department included 4 professors who taught courses in everything from Hindu beliefs to Christian history.

*"They know a great deal about a great many things in religion, but none of them are practicing any particular faith. I find that strange. They know everything about God except **God!**"*

ALL THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT THIS WAS NOT ONE OF PAUL'S MORE SUCCESSFUL EVANGELISTIC EFFORTS.

We do find some HELPFUL LESSONS, though!

We must always be ready to **speak up** and **speak out for Christ**.

Like Paul we must be prepared to do so with gentleness and reverence.

Like Paul we must not be judgmental and condemning of what I call religious tourists—but show respect for their ideas and religious curiosity..

A contemporary example of Paul's courage to take the faith to a hostile and indifferent crowd is found in the song “God gave me style” by Hip Hop star **50 cent**.

I admit to being pathetically out of touch with rap and much of popular music.

For other NEOPHYTES LIKE ME: Rap music began in the **late 70's** in the Bronx where music from multiple cultures: Caribbean, Latino, African and Anglo emerged.

Rap is the first multi-cultural American music.

But notice how 50 cent **Pushes the edge** with his audience to bring **Christian faith to FANS, that if we used the duality, TREND..** extremely Epicurean..

“God Gave Me Style”

God gave me style

God gave me grace

God put a smile on my face

God made me shine like the sun

Sometimes I feel like I'm the one.

Listen you can call me what you want, black and ugly  
But you can't convince me the Lord don't love me  
When my CDs drop, they sell the best  
You call it luck, why can't it just be I'm blessed  
I'm a trackstar, runnin' through life, chasin' my dream  
Best deal I made was tradin' the mic for that triple beam (a cross)  
i zone off thinkin' is there really heaven or hell  
So what happens to a changed man who dies in a cell  
Got a date with destiny, she's more than a girl  
Don't much good come from me, but my music  
is a gift given from God so I'ma use it (Yeaah!)

. . . These days its hard to tell who really cares for me  
So when you hear this song, you should say a prayer for me  
I put a message in my music, hope it brightens your day  
If times are hard, when you hear it, know you'll be okay

Perhaps all of us need to **stop reaching** so far in our search for God.

God is, after all “not far from each of us”

Our groping can end at the communion table, where we dine together as a family,  
where God is placed in our hands, and we are reminded that God has come, and will  
come again in Jesus the Christ. Amen.