

Idol behavior: Acts 17:22-31

I've seen the Athenians' approach in southern California.

by [Jenny Williams](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

Paul is making an unexpected visit to Athens. His proclamation of Christ crucified had angered the Jews at Thessalonica so much that they had followed him to Berea to incite riots in the crowds there. Rather than risk Paul's safety, the Berean believers had sent him off to Athens. There, while he waits for his colleagues to join him, Paul takes in the sights, tours the city and tries to learn something about its people. When he finds city shrines and altars dedicated to a variety of idols, he debates their existence wherever and with whomever he can: in the synagogue with the Jews, in the marketplace with the buyers and sellers, in the town center with the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers.

In this last location, the Areopagus, Paul gives his only speech in Acts to an entirely pagan audience. There he appeals to their religiosity and then tells them that their worship of graven images is a misguided search for the divine.

The Athenians, whose altar is dedicated "to an unknown god," are trying to cover all the bases. If the gods of their other altars or shrines fail them, perhaps an "as-yet-unnamed" deity will look favorably upon them. Though this sounds like an ancient problem, I've seen a similar sight in southern California. There you can get into a car that has a rabbit's foot sitting in the cup holder, a sacred heart air freshener dangling from the rearview mirror, a bobblehead Buddha sitting on the dashboard *and* a Darwin "fish with feet" emblem on the trunk.

People are reaching for an experience of the divine. Some express their search in their automobile shrines, while others kneel at the altar of Superlative Experience: they're seeking the highest high, the biggest vehicle, the most extreme sport, the most sordid confession on a reality show. Many in our culture are indulging in this cult of experience, which is actually a misguided groping for God.

The “experience” idol doesn’t stay out of our churches; in fact the importance of “a personal experience” often rides into the sanctuary and takes on a religious overtone. Christians grope for God by cultivating mountaintop emotions in worship and prayer time. I have heard church members remark that if the sermon makes them laugh or cry, they feel as if they have worshiped. Perhaps the idol of entertainment is at work here too, an idol that Neil Postman describes in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

Athenian philosophers bowed—not to a god of personal experience, but to the god of sharp intellect. What is curious about Paul’s speech in Athens is the mild response it draws. The apostle’s preaching generally leads either to great disturbances or to large numbers of converts, but in Athens the reaction of the listeners is lukewarm. Some scoff; others are willing to hear Paul speak again; a few convert. Why such a minimal reaction? Perhaps it is because the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers wanted to engage God only as a concept, and not as the God-man who lays a claim upon our lives.

Will Willimon tells the story of an undergraduate who complained about her college’s religion department, which included four professors who taught courses in everything from Hindu beliefs to Christian history. “They know a great deal about a great many things in religion,” she said, “but none of them in the department are practitioners of any particular faith. I find that strange. They know everything about God except God!”

To search for the divine as only an intellectual matter is another form of misguided groping for God. The danger is twofold. First, we treat God as a topic to be conquered. *If only I take another Bible study, if only I could get my questions answered, then I will know God.* The second danger is using God as an endorsement for commitments we already have or projects we’d like to see carried out.

Both idols—the idol of experience and the idol of intellectualization—create distance from God. If we believe that a strong emotion or the right theory helps us worship God, we end up worshiping the emotion or the theory. And worship of anything but God separates us from God.

Furthermore, there is division between those who choose one type of idol over another. Those who place primary importance on a personal experience of God are skeptical of too much “book learning,” while people who relentlessly search the

limits of the knowable are skeptical of too much emotion. When people of both stripes are sitting in the sanctuary, what are we to do?

First, we are to heed Paul's call to repentance, realizing that none of us has a corner on understanding God or living as Christ's disciple. And since repentance involves concrete acts of turning away from the old and toward the new, we are to behave like family, the family that God created through baptism. We are made in the image and likeness of God, not in the image of the idols who tempt us. We are obligated to listen to one another, and to discuss our differences across denominational lines, theological persuasions—and even across the center aisle of the sanctuary (where one side of the church prefers Paul Tillich, the other side, *Left Behind*).

And all of us need to stop reaching so far in our search for God. God is, after all, “not far from each one of us.” Our groping can end at the communion table, where we dine together as a family, where God is placed into our hands, and where we are reminded that God has come and will come again in Jesus the Christ.