

“Journeys and Destinations – Strange Things”
Pastor Wally Contreras
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“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” (Acts 17:16-21)

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Pastor Wally said that as a believer, I have pledged allegiance to a King I’ve never seen. Webster’s 1828 dictionary states that an “[e]xpress allegiance is that obligation which proceeds from an express promise, or oath of fidelity.” To a lost world, that might seem to be a rather “strange thing”. How can I explain my allegiance to God without sounding like a “babbling”?

So, Paul is waiting on Silas and Timothy in Athens and “his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.” John MacArthur once pointed out that “[w]hen Paul saw it for the first time, as Luke tells us, he was deeply moved, not by its art, not by its medicine, not by its political structures, but because he saw that the city was given totally to idolatry. The city had become a factory devoted to the manufacturing of pagan idols. When he saw that, Paul was moved to action.” Other translations state that Paul’s “spirit was painfully excited in him” (Darby Bible), “he was deeply troubled” (NLT), “he was greatly distressed” (NIV). Basically, he rolled up his sleeves and got to work sharing the Gospel message in the synagogue and the market place. How about me? When I see people who are busy worshipping their own little “g” gods, am I “greatly distressed”...am I moved to action or has some level of complacency in my life set in? Explain.

Pastor Wally said that idolatry “enslaves” me to a non-god. As Webster’s 1828 dictionary points out, when enslaved, I am “...reduced to slavery or bondage” and “deprived of liberty and subjected to the will of a master.” So many of the anti-Christian ideologies are based in a lost world’s sincere desire for meaning, justice, dignity, and/or pleasure and they will go to any length – expend any resource to achieve these goals. Do I see tend to see idolatry as being more of a poor choice or habit that someone can voluntarily give up, or do I see it as something that is much closer to that of an addiction that is not easily overcome and why?

C.S. Lewis once said that “God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.” How do I minister to someone who I believe has become “enslaved” by and “addicted” to a “non-god”?

“Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18) In his sermon delivered on March 24, 1861, Spurgeon said, “It is a dreadful thing when sin becomes not only nature, but a second nature—when the use of sin breeds the habit of sin, and the man gets entangled in the meshes of an iron net from which he has no power to escape. Yet, to him, even to him, bond-slave of many lusts—chained hand and foot, and straightly shut up against the power of God—even to him is the Word of the Gospel sent! “Let us reason together, says the Lord.” “The word “reason” (yāqah) is a law term used of arguing, convincing, or deciding a case in court. The people were to be convinced by their argumentation with God that He was right and they were wrong about their condition” (Bible Knowledge Commentary). When it comes to trying to “reason” with someone, do I at times try to negotiate with that person instead of trying to convince that them that they need Jesus as their Lord and Savior because the Gospel is such a “strange thing” to explain and I don’t want to sound like a “babbling”? If so, how so? If not, why not?

Just to finish out the Isaiah 1:18 passage of Scripture Spurgeon went on to say, “‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.’ Now these colors are selected because of their exceeding brilliance. Scarlet and crimson are colors which at once attract the eyes...Now, some sins are striking, glaring sins; you cannot help seeing them; and the sinner himself is compelled to confess them. But the Hebrew word, most of you know, conveys the idea of doubly dyed—what we call ingrained colors—when the wool has lain so long in the dye that it cannot be washed out, though you wash or wear it as long as you please—you must destroy the fabric before you can destroy the color. Many sins are of this class. Our own natural depravity, in fact, is just like this—it is ingrained...Yet here is the promise of full pardon for glaring and for ingrained lusts! And note how the pardon is put—“they shall be as snow”—pure white, virgin, snow! But snow soon loses its whiteness, and therefore it is compared to the whiteness of the wool washed and prepared by the busy housewife for her fair white linen. You shall be so cleansed that not the shadow of a spot, nor the sign of a sin, shall be left upon you!” In what way(s) is such a message a “strange thing” for some to hear and why?

Pastor Wally said that Jesus engaged people by asking questions and that is the model we should try to emulate. Paul “reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day.” Paul told Timothy “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Timothy 2:7). John Piper once wrote an

article laying out what he thought Paul's discussion with Timothy might have sounded like. Piper wrote (in part): "Paul: Yes, your mind is fallen and fallible...Take note, Timothy: even in raising the objection against thinking you are thinking! You can't escape the necessity of thinking. God's call is to do it well.

"Timothy: But, Paul, I don't want to become a cold, impersonal intellectual.

"Paul: There is danger on both sides, Timothy. There is cold knowledge, and there is a red hot zeal that "is not according to knowledge" (Romans 10:2). But thinking does not have to cool your zeal. In fact, in my life the vigorous exercise of my mind in spiritual things causes me to boil inside, not to freeze. You are right not to want to become "impersonal." That happens when thinking is emphasized to the exclusion of feeling about people; and reason is exalted above love. But note this, Timothy: the abandonment of thinking is the destruction of persons. Yes, there is more to personal relationships than thinking, but they are less human without it. God honored his image in us when he said, "Come, let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18). **Should we do less?**"

If God wants to "reason" with me and others (and He does) and as Piper asked "should we do less?", then why is it so difficult for Christians (for me?) to engage in a conversation with non-believers about Jesus? Explain.

Paul's "strange" message evoked curiosity on the part of the Athenians. They asked him for clarification. How would I respond to the question "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting"?

In what way(s) am I like "the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there [who] would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new" and why?

When the new becomes old, the world invents something that is now "new and improved." How easy is it for believers (and churches), when the Gospel message appears to not be working in someone's life (like my Who's Your One?) or it doesn't appear to be working fast enough for my liking, to attempt to share an "all new and improved" Gospel message?

Pastor Wally said that I am to "listen to what people say and answer accordingly in wisdom". He went on to say that there are times when we can't simply not answer, nor can we take the bait that someone puts out there and fire back at them with both barrels. There is a saying that silence means agreement with whatever is being said. So, how do I "answer accordingly in wisdom"?